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The Pull of the Show: An Ethnographic Study of Musical Theatre in Central Texas

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The Pull of the Show: An Ethnographic Study of Musical Theater in Central Texas

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The Pull of the Show: An Ethnographic Study of Musical Theater in Central Texas

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Musical theater has been described as one of the most distinctive and enduring American contributions to world culture. Its history, its compositions, its prominent creators and stage works, and its complex of various performance practices have been extensively studied by scholars in many disciplines. Most of the analysis of it, however, has been concerned with the most famous, expensive and nationally recognized manifestations of it. This dissertation is intended to broaden our understanding of musical theater by providing an on-the-ground view of it as it is performed and consumed at the community and semi-professional level in a geographic and cultural context outside of the most heavily discussed and visible centers of its creation, i.e., Broadway and Hollywood. It is rooted in several years of experience as a performer and a fan of local productions in central Texas, examining the effect that participating in musical theater has on the lives of those who make it, the complicated meanings that certain shows have for those who both perform and receive them, and the varied approaches to the task of producing original shows in a scene where musical theater is a somewhat neglected part of the local artistic identity. Ultimately, I argue that musical theater is uniquely illustrative of the role music and the performing arts play in socialization, individual wellbeing and in the tangled relationship between communal, aesthetic and economic values.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Musical, like jazz, is a quintessentially American art form; and like our country, it has been forged from many influences: comic opera, operetta, English music hall, minstrel shows, vaudeville and others. Musicals are also among the most collaborative of the arts, forged by teams that typically include composers, lyricists, librettists, directors, performers, choreographers, orchestrators, producers, arrangers and designers.

Description of musical theater on the library of Congress website (The Library of Congress celebrates the songs of America, accessed Feb. 2020)

For me, doing anything else just feels like if you took a screwdriver and flipped it around used the back end of it to hammer in a nail. You can do it and it will work but that's not what the screwdriver is for. **I can do other things but that's not what I'm for.**

Quote about performing in musicals by Kristin DeGroot, personal interview, March 26, 2019

Musical theater is an art form that requires the participation of many people for even the most modest production to successfully be made. While there are many kinds of performing arts that cross genres and disciplines, that engage multiple senses and utilize multiple means of expression, and that require the collective labor of a large group of people to create, few are quite like American musicals in terms of the variety of resources that must be harnessed in order to make them. Music and storytelling are deeply intertwined in many traditions from all over the world. Music and dance are so inseparable in many cultures that some languages do not even use different words for them. Most genres of popular music incorporate some element of visual arts in one way or another. But in terms of a practice that incorporates the musical, dramatic, visual

and movement arts, and that requires the coordination of potentially dozens of people, arguably only opera is comparable to musical theater. Opera, in its present-day practice, however, is largely ensconced in the realm of highly professional creators performing for audiences of wealthy elites, while musical theater is created in many different spaces, at many different levels of production, by and for many different kinds of people. Few art forms are as conducive to the creation of a shared experience and a group identity purely through the process of putting a performance together in quite the same way. More than nearly any kind of music making musical theater is not only deeply social but inherently communal.

This study is an ethnographic investigation into musical theater as it is practiced far removed from Broadway, and for the most part even outside of the LORT member theaters and other "Equity houses." It is a study of musical theater made at the community and semi-professional level in central Texas, especially in the greater Austin metropolitan area. It is an endeavor to identify the meaningful components of the processes of making musicals as well as the lived experiences of those who make them, the role it plays and the lasting effects it has on their lives, and the extent to which it produces its own subcultural identity or interacts with other facets of identity. It is an exploration of what happens before, during and after a show is performed from the perspective of onstage performers, directors, accompanists, music directors, crew members and audience members. It examines multiple productions of popular "classic" works as well as locally written, original shows. It includes analysis of the musical, linguistic, dance, costume and set design components of the works on stage as well as the actions, words and experiences in rehearsals, auditions, dressing rooms and in day-to-day life between shows. Since musical theater is itself interdisciplinary, it merits an interdisciplinary approach.

Like many ethnomusicologists throughout history, my research has been deeply informed by directly learning the performance practice of the artform as well as observing it. Early ethnomusicological studies like Jaap Kunst and Mantle Hood's studies of Indonesian gamelan foregrounded mastering or at least engaging with the *praxis* of a tradition in a hands-on manner, figuratively or literally. Subsequent scholars like Timothy Cooley, Time Rice, Carol Babiracki, Stephen Slawek and numerous others have provided precedents for how to use one's apprenticeship in a chosen performance tradition as a pathway into the scholarly analysis of it and the culture and people connected to it. Like many of my predecessors, much of my field experience has been in a sense an apprenticeship. As a result, performing in musical theater has become a part of my own identity, and this work, like many others in the field of ethnomusicology in recent years, constitutes an autoethnography. It aligns with many so-called classics of the field as well as more recent works such as Charulatha Mani's study of Karnatic vocal music and playback singing, or Tanya Merchant's study of the role of music in Bosnian American wedding ceremonies.[1] Like many of my peers and predecessors, I am, to an extent, a member of the group I have studied.

Historical Background

As articulated in the opening excerpt from the Library of Congress website, musical theater is described by many historians and institutions as an important part of American history and identity, and touted as one of the few enduring, distinctly American art forms (alongside

[1] Merchant, Tanya. "Song, Sevdah and Ceremony: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Music and Community Cohesion in Bosnian American Weddings." *Music in the American Diasporic Wedding*, edited by Inna Naroditskaya, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, USA, 2019, pp. 127–150.

Mani, Charulatha. "Singing across Cultures: an Auto-Ethnographic Study." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2017, pp. 245–264.

perhaps the western film, jazz music or a small handful of others). Ergo, much of the scholarly discussion of musical theater has connected it to discourses about the formation of Americanness and American nationalism. Throughout its history it has also been deeply tied to the experience of different minority identities and experiences as well, and many works have been analyzed for what they illustrate about the tension between national and subcultural consciousness.

Though many regard it as an (or perhaps THE) American art form, the precursors of musical theater have their origins in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, continental Europe vis a vis ballad opera and operetta. These subgenres of opera were crafted to be more accessible to presumably less sophisticated audiences in contrast to say grand opera. Musical theater, like ballad opera in particular, is delivered in the vernacular language of the intended audience, which manifests not only in most American and British musicals being written in English but also in using dialogue and lyrics meant to reflect contemporary vernacular speech. Concurrent with ballad opera and operetta in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, musical theater also had antecessors in the types of variety show entertainment practiced in vaudeville, minstrel shows and burlesque houses. The earliest musicals often were a loose review of many interchangeable, popular songs that may or may not have had any unifying plot or concept tying them together. Some of the summaries of the genre's history such as Gerald Mast's *Can't Help Singing'* (1987) and Larry Stempel's *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater* (2010) identify the true turning point when musical theater emerged as a distinct art form, as the advent of *integrated* or *book* musicals such as Jerome Kern's *Showboat* (1927) and Rogers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma* (1943)[2]. These works and others that followed in their example strove to integrate the score and the story such that every song and dance was written

[2] E.g. in Stempel pp. 192-202 and 289-340.

explicitly for the purpose of conveying the story and characters. For the purposes of my study, however, I am examining not only *book* musicals but also review shows and jukebox musicals, wherein the story is often a thinly sketched framing device to collect a song catalog of a particular artist or writers, as well as *rock operas*, wherein the story is told entirely in song, or more recent original works that sometimes use pieces of music and dance that were not necessarily originally written with a particular story in mind. From the 1910s through the 1940s Broadway musicals had a symbiotic relationship with the New York-based music publishing industry of Tin Pan Alley, and thus were at the forefront of popular music making in America for several decades.

Subsequent watershed developments in American music like Rhythm and Blues, Rock and Roll, Hip-hop etc. have usurped the dominant role that Broadway and Tin Pan Alley used to play in popular music and culture, but musical theater continued to develop and diversify after the 1950s. While earlier musicals tended to be comedic, light-hearted, and center on romances with happy endings, following the 1960s and throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, works of musical theater greatly expanded in breadth of subject matter, tone and the stylistic pallet in both the books/librettos and scores. Musicals that told "tragic" stories like Bernstein and Sondheim's *West Side Story*, musicals that incorporated contemporary rock and soul styles like *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, musicals that were intensely melodramatic like *Sweeney Todd* or darkly satirical like *Chicago* are just some of the many works of 1960s and 1970s that remain enduringly popular, and which continue to be revived and performed in regional and community productions to this day. The history of musical theater is thus one of seemingly contradictory developments: becoming more structurally refined and sophisticated as it began to peak in commercial popularity, and becoming much more eclectic and varied as its

prominence in the national music industry began to wane. In recent years musicals have continued to respond to new genres and movements in popular music, albeit at times lagging many years behind the introduction of said "new" forms of music ala recent musicals that have incorporated hip-hop and rapping like the immensely popular *Hamilton* (2014).

As a result of these conflicting trends between sophistication and populism, and its intermediary position between purportedly low-class entertainment like vaudeville, burlesques, and minstrel shows, and the elite, aristocratic varieties of opera and other genres of classical music, much of the scholarship about musical theater is shared between disciplines that tend to focus on popular culture and those that focus on high culture. In musicology, it has become less rare for historical musicologists to research topics outside the confines of European and North American art music, but musical theater differs greatly from much of the more established canon of Western Art music, e.g. opera and other European classical styles, and yet it is no longer quite at the absolute forefront of commercial music making. Musical theater may not have fallen through the scholarly cracks, so to speak, but it perhaps sits next to them.

Like the American musical, community theatre is a phenomenon with roots going back at least to the nineteenth century and that has been similarly entangled with the relationship between nationalism and the performing arts. The term "community theatre" is generally attributed to Louise Burleigh in 1917, but just as the phenomenon of musical theatre can be traced to the ballad opera of eighteenth century England, community theatre could be reckoned to extend as far back as the "amateur theatricals" of the eighteenth century American colonies. What Burleigh and other near contemporaries were describing was an outgrowth of the "little theatre" movement of early twentieth century America which was in turn inspired by the then recent "art theatre" movement in Europe. In America, the little theatre movement was in a sense

a rebellion, or at least a grassroots alternative to the then contemporary offerings of commercial theater, often employing all or partly amateur performers and encouraging community participation. Burleigh and others believed that this new movement of enthusiastic amateurs could be a way of encouraging local pride, patriotism and civic engagement through local access to and participation in the dramatic arts.[3]

Works of musical theater quickly became, and have consistently been, very popular in community theatres and by the mid twentieth century community theaters developed a symbiotic relationship with Broadway: shows that opened on Broadway would release the rights of amateur production following the completion of the national tour, and community productions become a new way for people to become acquainted with the art form and grow the base of talent and fans in their local scenes. In 1968, Wisconsin educator and performing arts proselyte Robert Gard proclaimed that "Community Theatre occupies a peculiarly important position in the American theater picture. It is the largest, by far, of the theater's numerous segments, and has the best chance of reaching the average citizen and family. In the bigger cities its clientele is the neighborhood; in smaller ones, a fair cross section of the stable, educated population; and to countless localities not served by the professional or the educational theater, it offers the only opportunity to see live drama….It engages more people in theatrical activity, albeit part-time, than all the rest of the American theatre put together, including schools and colleges."[4] Today the American Association of Community Theaters (AACT) lists over 7,000 member organizations, which utilize more than 1.5 million participants in more than 46,000 productions entertaining

[3] Elizabeth Copeland Norfleet, "Louise Burleigh Powell: An Artist in the World of the Theatre, on Stage, and Behind the Scene," *Richmond Quarterly* 6 (Fall 1983): 22–28.
[4] Gard, Robert. *Theater In America: Appraisal and Challenge For the National Theatre Conference* (1968).

more than 86 million audience members per year (and the AACT does not account for all community theater activity in the United States).[5]

The local scene where I have conducted fieldwork and gotten to know my many collaborators is often referred to as the central Texas live theatre scene, reflected by the website ctxlivetheatre.com, which was started and operated by Michael Meigs in 2008 and which collects event calendars, audition postings, reviews and other announcements from theaters in Austin, San Antonio, and other smaller towns in central Texas like Bryan/College Station, Killeen and Fredericksburg. The theaters and companies that I have performed with, observed, auditioned or attended performances at have all been represented here at one point or another including The Georgetown Palace Theatre, City Theatre Austin, Zach Theatre, The Public Theatre of San Antonio, Tex-Arts at Lakeway, Austin Playhouse, The Vortex Theatre, Sam Bass Theatre, Trinity Street Players and numerous others, alongside companies that have not been attached to specific venues (some of which have since become defunct or inactive) like Austin Theatre Project and The Austin Jewish Repertory Theatre. This abundance is part of what has made central Texas a highly compelling site for this study, as well as the fact that the region contains both the state capital and the second most populous city in the state with the former ranked close to the top of the fastest growing American cities multiple times in recent years.[6] There have been many musical ethnographies conducted in Texas,[7] but no one has extensively studied musical theater in this way anywhere in the state, and central Texas has the distinct quality of both sporting an abundance of community and professional theaters and yet neither of the state's

[5] AACT estimated that there were more 15,000 community theaters in the U.S. in 1975 and the number has only grown since, though as they note this is complicated due to how quickly organizations are formed and disbanded: https://aact.org/community-theatre-history.
[6] "America's Fastest Growing Cities 2016". *Forbes*. January 14, 2017.
[7] Such as Aaron Fox's *Real Country* (2005) which is discussed subsequently and Peña's *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: History of a Working-Class Music* (1985).

official LORT member theaters.[8] Furthermore, the unique commingling and at times clashing of cultures and identities that manifest in Austin in particular, and how local performers and creators maneuver within it make it an extremely intriguing locus for any study of the performing arts.

Central Questions

Some of the questions with which I embarked on this research project and which have informed the writing of this dissertation, whether or not a definitive answer was possible, include: What is the attraction for those who participate? How does it affect one's sense of self and belonging? How does it express or affect other aspects of one's identity? Is there are a strict boundary between insiders and outsiders? Is it proper to discuss musical theater as a single subculture or is the collective identification it stimulates more transitory and more focused on specific places and groups?

There has been an abundance of scholarship about the extent to which music expresses or represents community, and the important role music plays in any number of communities of all kinds. In some cases, scholars have asserted that the realization of community in a particular society actually occurs in musical performance.[9] Musical theater is especially useful to illustrate the palpable, day-to-day, lived forms of community as opposed to more abstract and *imaginary* communities in the Andersonian sense.[10] In order to adequately address musical theater as a

[8] http://lort.org/theatres.
[9] E.g. Chernoff, John Miller. *African Rhythms and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action In African Musical Idioms.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979., page: 149.
[10] Referring of course to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) which influentially theorized the extent to which ethnic and national identities were dependent on imaginary connections between people who do not, and cannot, possibly know each other.

kind of community, it is necessary to draw from the experiences and perspectives of those who take part in many different aspects of staging live musical theater: principal cast, ensemble performers, directors, musicians, crew and audience are all part of the community, and all of them have their own thoughts and feelings about it.

Community, along with *communitas*, in Victor Turner's usage, referring to the sense of communal equanimity forged through a shared experience like a rite of passage, are useful and important concepts in this ethnography. Corollary to community, I have often encountered notions of surrogate family that are invoked by my collaborators, at times in highly sentimental or romanticized terms. However, I do not naively and uncritically accept "family" simply for its emotional potency. For one, the concept of surrogate familiality can also be used to encompass and describe conflict, tension or dysfunction as often as it can describe more wholesome relationships. Due to how frequently different ideas of family have been articulated by those with whom I have shared these experiences, the issue of how this kind of performing art substitutes, simulates or buttresses the bonds of family is necessary to consider.

In *Habits of the Heart* (1985), Robert Bellah and his collaborators proposed one of the more influential theoretical framings of community in America vis-à-vis the ideas of commitments, cohesion and authenticity. The various contributions to this book were attempting to answer whether or not American social life in the modern era retained strong enough bonds and senses of obligation between people to countervail against the corrosive, toxic individualism or atomism that has been observed to be fundamental to American culture since at least the days of De Tocqueville. The notion of authenticity has been extensively analyzed and problematized[11]

[11] Especially in anthropological studies of tourism e.g. Smith's *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of tourism* (1977) and John Taylor's *Authenticity and Sincerity in Tourism* (2001).

and has specifically been applied to music by scholars like T.D. Taylor, who proposed that music consumers and fandom communities often filter their tastes and their genre classifications through the ideas of authenticity of primality, authenticity of positionality and authenticity of emotionality.[12] More recent scholars of music pedagogy and ethnomusicology have further explored the challenging, ambiguous and constructed nature of authenticity, with some advocating that a variable, pluralistic idea of authenticity/ies should be a centralized component of music pedagogy, e.g. Tom Parkinson and Gareth Dylan Smith's *Towards an Epistemology of Authenticity in Higher Popular Music Education* (2015) [13] while others have argued that authenticity should be discursively "undone" due to its deep imbrication with racial essentialism and othering of non-Western cultures as in Kruger's *Undoing Authenticity as a Discursive Construct: A Critical Pedagogy of Ethnomusicology and "World Music"* (2013)[14]. Community commitment and the quest for authenticity, as fraught and convoluted as the latter term has become, help to explain the roots of the attraction to participating in community musical theater, and the various discourses of authenticity as applied to music by Taylor and others are useful in understanding the ways in which the social and cultural dimensions of music are presented and shaped among those who make musicals.

Since there are few theaters who are committed to exclusively performing original works that are written locally, much of the analysis of local performances is focused on how local versions of familiar works differ from the nationally famous renditions and from one another.

[12] Taylor, T.D. *Global Pop: World Music* (1997).

[13] Parkinson, Tom, Smith, Gareth Dylan (2015) *Towards an Epistemology of Authenticity in Higher Popular Music Education.* Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education, 14 (1). pp. 93-127.

[14] Krüger, S (2013) *Undoing Authenticity as a Discursive Construct: A Critical Pedagogy of Ethnomusicology and "World Music".* In: Alge, B and Kraemer, O, (eds.) Beyond Borders: Welt-Musik-Pädagogik: Musikpädagogik und Ethnomusikologie im Diskurs. Wissner Verlag, Augsburg, pp. 93-114.

The different kinds of continuity and transformation from one production of a show to another is a locus for the discussion of how different artistic works retain their identity and meaning to the people who perform and receive them as well as how the meanings associated with them change iteratively. Musical theater, like any performance art, is created in the moment, but many works are accorded historical significance and an aesthetic or cultural identity that exerts a powerful force or influence on people. As much as the written work is regarded as a template for the ephemeral, the synchronic performance in time, the work or the show as an enduring artifact and a connection to history is still an important consideration as well.

Theoretical Framework

Alan Merriam provided one of the more enduring definitions of ethnomusicology as the study of "music as culture,"[15] and this research is accordingly concerned with musical theater as a cultural as well as musical phenomenon. Foundational studies by Merriam, Bruno Nettl and others have helped to argue that a musical tradition not only functions as an important part of a larger culture but as a robust cultural sphere in and of itself. I am also concerned with ideas of subculture, performance, and with the scholarly tradition concerned with examination everyday life.[16] This study examines what defines musical theater as a cultural realm and what exactly are its dimensions and internal dynamics, and doing so in a way that foregrounds the lived experiences of the people involved, making their own thoughts, feelings and words visible. While writers such as Dick Hebdige, in *Subculture: The Meaning Of Style* (1979), have conceptualized the formation of subculture as a kind of "symbolic resistance,"[17] I am not

[15] In *The Anthropology of Music* (1964) Merriam described ethnomusicology as the study of "music in culture." He and Bruno Nettl helped to popularize the idea of "music as culture."
[16] Especially works like Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).
[17] Pp. 133-148.

focusing entirely or even primarily on the resistive or counterhegemonic character of subculture (conscious or otherwise), but rather I am using it as a way to describe a particular stratum of communal and personal identity. At times I may refer simply to "the scene" of central Texas, or the dynamics of even smaller groups of people within said scene as their own subculture or microculture. By discussing musical theater variously as a kind of community, as a kind of performance, as well as something that becomes part of day-to-day lived experience and has continuing effects on its participants' existence, I am following the example of cultural anthropologists like Sherry Ortner, who have argued that the efficacy of ethnographic research is to avoid "the fantasy that one can understand the workings of public cultural representations solely by interpreting/deconstructing the representation"[18] and scholars who have connected the study of the everyday to music and popular culture.[19]

Scholars of performance have also given extensive attention to the ways in which non-normative or non-mainstream identity finds expression in the performing arts and popular culture. While much of the scholarly work on musical theater has tended to focus on race, gender, or sexuality, such as John Clum's *Something For The Boys* (1999) or Andrea Most's *Making Americans: Jews And the Broadway* Musical, I intend to also investigate the extent to which class, generation, region and other forms of identification are expressed, adapted and transformed through the performance of musical theater. Many of these themes are especially manifest in locally written and produced shows, but also in the choices made in selecting, casting and staging famous shows with specific audiences in mind.

[18] In "Generation X: Anthropology in a Media Saturated World" (1999), p. 56.
[19] Such as Harris Berger and Giovanna Del Negro's "Identity and Everyday Life: Essays in the Study of Folkmore, Music and Popular Culture" (2004).

Cultural anthropologists who have studied theater and other closely related varieties of performance have also incorporated the study of myths, ritual and narrative into their analysis, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s in the work of Claude Levi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins and others. In subsequent decades ethnomusicologists such as Steven Feld, Mark Slobin and Peter Manuel began to devote ethnographic monographs to specific, mass-mediated musical subcultures (e.g. Slobin's *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* or Manuel's *Casette Culture*). Since many commonly performed works of musical theater repertory come from decades past and pertain to subjects that have strong resonance in the national and western cultural imaginary, the task of inspecting how archetypes, mythemes (owing to Levi-Strauss e.g. in *Structural Anthropology*), and other articles of narrative and mythic structure are conveyed through the creation of live musical theater is an integral part of the theoretical framing. What does staging *1776* with a gender- and race-blind casting in the twentieth century mean to a modern audience in central Texas? How does the romanticization of the European middle ages and the code of chivalry resonate with American audiences who filter their experience of Lerner and Loewe's *Camelo*t in part through its connection to the Kennedy administration? What does it mean to nostalgically revive works like *Grease* or *Little Shop of Horrors* which themselves represented nostalgic longing and mythologizing of even earlier decades from when they were originally conceived? Et cetera.

Many practitioners of autoethnography, particularly when foregrounding one's apprenticeship to individual tutors, have alluded to the idea of the hermeneutic circle, as described in the works of Ricoeur and incorporated into ethnographic contexts by anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, and in ethnomusicology by scholars like Tim Rice.[20] In the

[20] Rice, Tim. *May it Fill Your Soul: Experiencing Bulgarian music*: 8-11.

conceptual framing of the hermeneutic arc/circle, an individual frame of reference originates with its own preconceptions and prior subjectivity, acquires new information and experience from the connections forged with others, and finds itself expanded each time new experiences, relationships and ideas are incorporated. This metaphor is apt not only for individual experience and the relationship dynamics of tutor/apprentice or guru/shisya, but also for more complex multilateral relationships formed in companies, theaters and other related conglomerations of people.

The metaphor of expanding, overlapping circles is also an apt description of the layers of association that exist among those who practice musical theater. A specific production represents the inner circle while the talent pools of a specific theater comprise an outer layer, and the wider subdivisions of the citywide, greater metropolitan and larger regional scenes represent still further outer ones. This framing is distinct from, though also compatible with, notions of intersectionality, though in this case not principally concerned with intersections as vectors of oppression but merely as forms of cohesion. The concentric circular theory, in fact, can supplement questions of intersectional identification by helping buttress discussions of race, gender, sexual orientation and class with how they are also layered alongside even smaller conceptions of self and community. At times I will describe the varying collective formations simply as circles, implicitly informed by the transformative potential that being drawn into or delineated outside said circles have.

A related concept used by Guthrie Ramsey in *Race Music* (2004) in his analysis of African-American music history as (appropriately enough) “community theater," referring to the small, private, often family-based social spaces where collective memory and identity is enacted. In Ramsey’s usage, different settings and sites of memory are “theaters” unto themselves

including family histories, churches, night clubs, dances, cinemas and other.[21] This idea takes on an obviously literal component when applied to this subject and is useful to foreground the way smaller spheres of social formation and interaction can help to understand larger societal issues. Building on Ramsey's notions, I have endeavored to examine the private, more removed spaces tied to the making of this artform.

The ways in which cultures, subcultures, or other social groups define themselves are often intricately tied to notions of the authentic, something sociologists and cultural anthropologists have debated extensively for decades and which have been used as overarching themes in ethnomusicological works like Aaron Fox's *Real Country* (2004) and David Grazian's *Blue Chicago* (2003), which examine how practitioners and audiences of particular styles of music conceive of what does or does not belong to their culture. Often, these self-definitions are filtered through lenses of class, family, or communal values, generation, race and history, and manifest themselves in language, music, clothing, and other kinds of public performance. The fans and performers of musicals, like any other group, have certain mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and discourses of authenticity are certainly part of such determinations.

Methodology and Research Experience

I have been involved with musical theater in the Austin area in one capacity or another for nearly six years. Before it became the subject of my doctoral research, I participated with a musical theater master class taught by director, pianist and choreographer Adam Roberts through the State Theatre in downtown Austin. Since then my field experiences as a performer and as a participant observer have come from my involvement with different productions from 2016-

[21] Ramsey: pp. 1-16.

2019, with occasional reference to experiences earlier or later. I have performed in more than seventeen different productions with more than ten different theaters and companies and have developed personal and professional relationships with members of the cast and crew of several different productions. I have served as a principal performer, an ensemble performer, and have also contributed as a musician and at times as a substitute accompanist during rehearsals. I have also been in numerous auditions, attended many performances as an audience member, and conducted numerous formal interviews with cast members, directors, music directors and accompanying musicians, while also recording my observations of performances, rehearsals, dressing room conversations and auditions.

Many of my contributors are performers with many years or even decades of experience, some of whom have also been part of other regional, community, and national touring productions who have aided me tremendously in becoming acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of the local scene and how it might both align with or differ from other places where musical theater is performed. Over the course of my research I have seen many organizations and people undergo both subtle and radical changes. Some theaters have changed their status from community to professional, some theaters and companies have become inactive or dissolved altogether. Many performers have moved into Texas, while many others have moved away from central Texas to pursue their ambitions in New York, Chicago, San Diego or other places. I have seen romances form and marriages broken apart, friendships formed and strained.

As an ethnomusicologist, my approach is rooted in ethnography, but as a scholar who has been active during an era when many researchers have striven to balance the ethnographic approach of ethnomusicology and the historical and historiographic methods of historical musicology, I have adopted an inclusive approach to my own methodology. I believe it is both

beneficial and necessary to examine musical theater from many different angles and perspectives. To paraphrase my earlier assertion, since musical theater itself is very multifarious, it merits similar eclecticism of method. I intend to explain the performance practice of musical theater as it exists locally in central Texas, its influence on the mental states, wellbeing and identity of those who participate in it, and the ways in which cultural information vis a vis narratives, archetypes, memes, history and mythology are transmitted and modified in the process of putting a popular written work into a contemporary performance context. This project has thus been concerned with 1) participant observation 2) analysis of performance practice 3) interpretative analysis of attendant behavior adjacent to performance, and contributing administrative and economic activities 4) interviews with participants in multiple facets of the creation of musical theater 5) historical research 6) analysis of reception from published reviews, audience commentary as well as narratives of reciprocal interactions between the stage and the audience in the moment.

Scholarly Contributions

Many of the significant pieces of scholarship on musical theater have followed the trends and trajectories of the humanities at large and of musicology in particular since the 1980s; and while few of them have originated from ethnomusicologists or used an ethnographic approach, many of them still serve as necessary background literature in application to this research. One of the first contributions from the years when musicologists began to regard traditions apart from western art music as meriting serious scholarly study is Gerald Mast's *Can't Help Singin'* (1987) which is one of the first attempts at a comprehensive, scholarly history of musical theater as an art form. This work and many of the subsequent books that have followed it exemplify a somewhat old fashioned "great men and great works" approach to the analysis of musical

theater. Mast, who came from a film studies background, tended to focus on Hollywood and Broadway, building a somewhat auteur-centric account of the genre's history from its roots in the various 19th century performance traditions to its more currently popular 20th century repertory. Among the composers, lyricists and plays that are treated as cornerstones in his history are George Cohan, Rogers and Hammerstein, Stephen Sondheim, Andrew Lloyd Webber and representative stage works like *Singing in the Rain, Showboat, Oklahoma, West Side Story, Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Sweeney Todd.*

Works like Mast's are useful as a starting point to construct a sense of the genre's historiography and the composition of its canon. More recent histories of musical theatre like John Bush Jones's *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical* (2003) and John Kenrick's *Musical Theatre: A History* (2008) have done more to connect and parallel the development of the genre to major historical events and social changes in American history, especially Jones' work whose chapters are structured based on important topics in American political, social and cultural history and their connection to the developments of American musicals such as the roaring Twenties, The Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the civil rights movement etc.

Other scholarship that has targeted the realm of musical theater has been more oriented towards textual, sonic and stylistic analysis, including works like Joseph Swain's *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* and Geoffrey Block's *Enchanted Evenings* which examine musical theater as a whole through in-depth analysis of specific pieces and in particular the interaction between their musical and dramaturgical dimensions. Swain's book in particular accords more with the methods and orientation of music theory and composition analysis than ethnomusicology, examining the elements of genre, sound and style of certain influential stage

works and approaching them first and foremost as *compositions* (consequently also taking an auteur-centric approach to the conveyance and interpretation of meaning within them). Block's book exemplifies a somewhat more expanded approach by examining the many other strata of collaboration in the staging and realization of musical theater and focusing a great deal on the processes of change via revision, adaptation and revival. Block's take and others like it align with more post-modern challenges to the stability of the *Werktreue* concept of a work (theatrical, musical or literary) as a single, stable, cohesive unit, a challenge which is to a large extent necessitated by examining productions at local, communal levels, although in my discussion the status and significance of *the work* or *the show* is still intensely important and relevant.

Other books that have emphasized the modification through transmission of musical theater include Bruce Kirle's *Unfinished Business: Broadway Musicals as Works in Progress* (2005). This exemplifies a trend away from the examination of stage musicals primarily as literary works, or as long-form compositions of music, and towards a more holistic view of them as performative constructs continually reconfigured by the process of live performance and shaped by their recontexualizing in and through historical changes and interpretation by new audiences. This perspective is particularly useful for reconciling canonical approaches to the repertoire of American (as well as British and European to a lesser extent) musicals with the more varied and dispersed renderings that they undergo in contexts more and more removed from their original creation, a la in regional and community theater performances that an ethnographer like myself would be more likely aim their focus on.

Much subsequent scholarship in recent years has paralleled the trends in cultural studies towards questioning and deconstructing the established canon of the genre while making exegeses on what different plays and performances of them mean for minority identities that

have been expressed in the realm of musical theater. Raymond Knapp's two volume *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity,* as their titles indicate, exemplify how the scholarship on musical theater in recent years has looked more and more at the tensions between what musical theater means for nationalism and what it means to minority culture, experiences of assimilation, and the reconciliation between the collective and the individual.

These are all very apropos considerations in taking an ethnographic approach towards the practice of musical theater. Knapp's first volume focuses on how different works of musical theater address, represent or respond to different notions of what it means to be American, with particular attention to underlying myths about American culture's inclusiveness and/or it's melting pot quality and the lived processes these myths stand for with regard to the addressing of outsiders either through assimilation or rejection. These kinds of tension between belonging and exclusion are certainly played out in the subculture that surrounds the art form itself, as well as within written works, and are an instructive example to formulate an ethnographic project.

Knapp's second volume is useful for providing different potential themes around which to structure and organize studies on the individual expressions that manifest in a group context. One of the perspectives that my research takes is to discuss the appeal and attraction the practice has for people on intensely individual, personal terms as well as the communal and collective bonds it helps form. Indeed Knapp's themes of "Fantasy" "Idealism and Inspiration," and "Fairy Tales" all help to understand the hows and whys of featured performance for soloists and small groups and the attempted fulfillment of desires on the part of both performer and audience when an individual is alone (or nearly so) on stage. Knapp even provides a useful concept for discussing the different kinds of heightened emotion and exaggeration (e.g. camp) that are a

mainstay of this kind of performance with his notion of "Musical Enhanced Reality Mode" (rendered as MERM, appropriately reminiscent of Broadway star Ethel Merman).

The performative dimensions of musical theater have been a focus for a growing number of scholars such as John Clum's *Something For the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (1999), Millie Taylor's *Musical Theater, Realism and Entertainment* (2012) and Dominic Symonds and Millie Taylor's volumes *Gestures of Music Theatre*(2012) and *Studying Musical Theatre* (2014). Clum's book focuses on the unique resonances that musical theater performance has for homosexual men in America (at least for those who were of or near his generation). Taylor's book examines how performers in musical theater connect with their audience and transmit their intended meanings to them, viewing the whole performance complex of music, dance and stage spectacle as a "performance text" in the Geertzian parlance. The various contributors to Symonds' and Taylor's edited volumes collect a variety of different perspectives on the social, cultural and personal meanings that can be enacted, modified and conveyed through the acts of singing and dancing on stage. These serve as blueprints for applying the tools of theater, dance and performance studies in an ethnomusicological context, in a manner compatible with the hermeneutic approach to anthropology as exemplified by the works of Clifford Geertz and Marshall Sahlins.

These and works like them often apply many of the ideas of Judith Butler and other scholars of *performativity* [22] to topics including but not limited to the performance of gender and sexuality (e.g. the "performance" of community, individual self-realization etc.). Scholars like Stacy Wolf in particular have focused many pieces on feminist and/or queer readings of specific

[22] Butler, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*. Theatre Journal Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 519-531.

aspects of musical theatre performance practice such as *Defying Gravity': Queer Conventions in the Musical 'Wicked'* (2008) or of the musical theatre repertory more broadly such as *Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the Broadway Musical* (2002). Many of these scholars have also endeavored to broaden the conception of musical theater as purely escapism or spectacle, conceiving of it rather as an arena where many different possible meanings and interpretations are generated, conveyed and manipulated and that is a core purpose of this dissertation as well.

Some of the works that have centered around the relationship between minority identity and culture, with a great deal of reference to narratives of assimilation and the American melting pot, include Allen Woll's *Dictionary of the Black Theatre: Broadway, Off Broadway and Selected Harlem Theatre* (1983) and *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (1989), Andrea Most's *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) and *Theatrical Liberalism: Jews and Popular Entertainment in America* (2013) and Warren Hoffman's *The Great White Way: Race the Broadway Musical* (2014). As many of the more historically oriented works have emphasized, musical theater in America, while often heavily skewed towards a white, middle to upper class audience, was heavily derived from and indebted to the music and culture of Jewish and African Americans. Woll's books describe the connection between American musical theatre and minstrelsy, the often neglected history of early black musicals such as Noble and Sissle's *Shuffle Along* (1921), the overlooked contributions of black artists, black style and black sensibilities in shaping musical theater in Broadway and black perspectives being an important means through which an artform often regarded as escapist fantasy could be made to address serious social issues.

Most's *Making Americans* describes the ways many composers and producers of Jewish background incorporated their experience with different strategies of assimilation into the songs

and stories they crafted. *Theatrical Liberalism* is concerned with theater in a broader sense but much of its content still concerns some of the same pieces of musical theater and film e.g. *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) or *The Jazz Singer* (1928). These examples are helpful to inform any work that seek to address the variety of different ethnic backgrounds that comprise the audiences and talent pool of smaller, local scenes and how their own strategies either to stand out or blend in factor into their relationship to their surroundings.

Warren Hoffman's book, like much recent scholarship, interrogates the role that whiteness has in the history of musical theater, even asserting that "the history of the American musical theater is the history of white identity in the United States." The alleged "whiteness" of American musicals is one of many pathways to compare and contrast performance as it is conducted in more nationally visible settings vs. its existence in remote regions and subcultural centers. The central Texas theater scene certainly is a useful demographic case study to explore whiteness in reference to minority heritages and populations, with the opportunity in particular to explore those that have been given somewhat less attention in reference to their contribution to musical theater. The Hispanic, indigenous and Asian-American experiences are ones that have not been discussed to the same extent as those of black or Jewish Americans in the development of musical theater in many of the established historical accounts, and many of the people I have worked with, observed and interviewed belong to said groups (although I have only specified the race or ethnicity of different informants when it is directly pertinent).

Other writings, like Elizabeth Wollman's *The Theater Will Rock* (2006), or Henry Bial's *Playing God: The Bible On The Broadway Stage* (2015), have explored the specific relationships between musical theater and other subcultures, moving outside the more well-mined topics of race and gender: religion in the case of the later, and rock and roll as a generationally and

musically defined subculture in the case of the former. These pieces help outline the increasing heterogeneity within musical theater, which ties to the many layers of variations that the genre collectively, along with specific individual creations, has undergone throughout time and space.

Some scholars have attempted to bridge methodological divides by conducting "historical ethnographies" focusing on musical theater. For example, Carol Oja's *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art In a Time Of War* attempts to probe the neglected contributors to the original staging of a canonical piece of musical theater repertory, namely Leonard Bernstein's *On The Town,* a work that emerged at an important point in the genre's (and the country's) history. This subject matter simultaneously hews closely to a canonical piece of repertory while also exemplifying how to give attention to underappreciated people and places that were connected to it. As the various histories of the genre, as well as the results of my own fieldwork, have attested, there is most certainly a canon of musical theater, even if specific iterations of canonical pieces are greatly modified, idiosyncratic, or even highly deviant from their original renditions. A major focus of *Bernstein Meets Broadway* is discussing the work of African-Americans and other people of color involved in different aspects of the production and reception, a notable example being Japanese-American conductor Sono Osato, who performed the debut performance of *On the Town* even while her father was imprisoned in a Japanese internment camp. Some of the resources to which Oja avails herself are useful in considering how to conduct a blend of historical research and ethnography, such as archival interviews, independent press, reviews, personal correspondence and production notes.

Perhaps the most relevant recent contributions of a scholar of musical theatre conducting fieldwork-based research focused on the practice of the artform outside of New York and Broadway have been recent works by Stacy Wolf including *The Hills Are Alive With The Sound*

of Music: Musical Theatre at Girl's Jewish Summer Camps in Maine, USA (Contemporary Theatre Review, 2017) and *Beyond Broadway: the Pleasure and Promse of Musical Theatre Across America* (2019) (which incorporates much of the same research in the former article). The latter is especially significant due to being based on several seasons of fieldwork travelling throughout the United States and examining the practice of musical theatre in high schools, outdoor summer musicals, dinner theatres and community theatres. Wolf's book has more direct similarity with this research than almost any prior scholarship on musical theater due to its framing of musical theatre principally as a social and communal activity. Likewise Wolf's methodology has a great deal of commonality with my own due to her combination of embedded observation, interviews and archival research although the experiences she collects do not derive from direct participation in the performance practice (she does describe her involvement in high school and community productions in her earlier life as being formative experiences). Wolf argues for the interdependence between local musical theatre and Broadway by examining the extent to which the talent pool of Broadway is dependent on those who have been introduced to musicals through participating in local productions and the important role that the licensing of nationally famous plays has in supporting community, high school and children's theater productions across the country. She also asserts that local and community musical theater is richly important and meaningful on its own for the role it plays in the lives of those who partake in it and for what it illustrates about local and national culture, a perspective my own fieldwork has caused me to share.[23]

[23] Wolf's statements that "Local musical theatre is an underexamined, undervalued practice that touches millions of people's lives" and that it is "an activity to be valued in and of itself for its contributions to individuals' lives and their communities" (p. 5) certainly accords with much of what I have discovered.

While this recent example in some ways more closely resembles the survey-model of early twentieth century anthropology due its breadth in terms of geographic distribution across the country (examining cases in New Jersey, Colorado, California, Minnesota and Texas among other states), it serves as a useful compliment to works like mine that engage in more focused, intensive studies of specific areas and that draw from direct involvement in productions as a performer in addition to observation of on and off stage processes. By coincidence our field experiences even converged in space albeit not in time vis a vis her discussion of Zilker Theatre Productions in her chapter on outdoor summer musicals, specifically a production of the Sound of Music from 2012 several priors to my involvement with them.[24]

The collected scholarship on musical theater provides a solid foundation for a historical perspective necessary for a fieldwork study, with some scholars exemplifying a proverbial dipping of the toes into ethnographic approaches to the topic of musical theater. Though there are few, if any, studies within the field of ethnomusicology, or even in cultural anthropology, on American musicals or Broadway specifically, there is a rich tradition of examining different kinds of public performance, rituals and other kinds of theatrical traditions in anthropology and ethnomusicological worlds to which an "insider" ethnography of musical theater can contribute.

Chapter Organization

The second chapter is about the surprisingly complicated issue of what community means to those who make local musical theater, and how it interacts with ideas that are similarly meaningful like professionalism, authenticity, value, status, humility and prestige. It is particularly focused on an interpretative analysis of the many practices and behaviors through

[24] Her discussion of this production is found in the fifth chapter (pp. 204-213).

which concepts of *community* and *professional* are communicated as discursive actions. It discusses economic activities such as how theaters designate, brand and market themselves, how they choose to spend their money and how they choose to ask for it. It looks at how mentors treat their proteges, how companies behave during rehearsals, comments made by members of production teams during auditions and the myriad of choices made about selecting, casting and staging a work of musical theater that reveal the hidden, complex and often tense web of meanings entailed in the seemingly simple categories of "community theater" and "professional theater."

The third chapter is an in-depth discussion of the effect that being involved with musical theater has on individuals' mental states, identity and well-being. It explores the reasons people attest for doing musical theater and the efforts of individuals to psychologically define themselves and each other via asking the simple question of why they do what they do. It opens dialog with the hard sciences by relating some of the recent findings about the neurological impacts of social music-making to personal accounts from interviews with performers and other participants in productions about their subjective experiences. This chapter especially owes a great deal to my collaborators and prominently features their own descriptions of what they have gone through in their own words. In particular, it explores how participating in musical theater produces a sense of exhilaration or satisfaction, how the completion of a show and the periods of inactivity between shows can induce a depressive state, and how the shared experience produces a feeling of communal or quasi-familial bonding.

Chapter four is focused on how local productions engage in one way or another with the aggregate meaning or meanings that famous written works have acquired. I look at how musicals as written works with long histories can exert their own kind of agency or influence, which I

have described simply as a *pull,* via how it informs people's thoughts and behaviors at many moments during the process of putting on or viewing a show. I examine productions I was personally involved in and ones that I attended as an audience member or observer. At times I compare and contrast different takes on the same shows by different theaters. In contrast to some recent scholarship that has highlighted transformation, rupture and discontinuity as inevitabilities in converting a document/s into live performances, I argue that it is important to also recognize the degrees of continuity and that so-called great works and great auteurs (somewhat generously defined) still matter *because* they matter to the people affected by them. I attempt to reconcile scholarship that has problematized or deconstructed the primacy of the written work and *Werktreue* with investigations to musical theater as a live, on-the-ground phenomenon created in the moment.

Chapter five is focused on locally written and produced musicals in the greater Austin area and how they exemplify the ways local creative teams and performers consciously or otherwise grapple with local identity, their relationship to the local scene, or with how to express their own personalities and idiosyncrasies in ways compatible with the political, economic, logistical and aesthetic context they find themselves in. I analyze the lyrics and scores of original works including those written as light comedies for small town audiences and more ambitious scores striving to emulate the scope and depth of works of the canon.

The concluding chapter revisits the questions of what defines musical theater as it is practiced in central Texas, what it means and why it matters, and how this study can serve as a catalyst for further ethnographic research into musical theater, community theater and other related phenomena. I have striven to write in a manner that minimally changes and edits the words and ideas of my contributors in order to make them visible and intelligible to the reader,

while also being honest and candid about my own relationship to the people, places and events I am describing. I have attempted to write in a manner that, while scholarly, is also accessible to the people who have been involved in one way or another with this study and the people outside of academia to whom it is relevant. I hope that this dissertation does justice to the people with whom I have shared the stage, the dressing room, the audition hallways, the rehearsals, the matinee seats and, ultimately, many years of life in the theater.

Chapter 2: Community Can Be A Dirty Word

The idea of *community* in and through the practice of art may at times seem to be a romanticization or an attempt to justify the significance and utility of artistic practices by arguing for their ability to reinforce communal solidarity. Even ethnomusicologists and other academics often seem to draw dramatic conclusions about the significance a form of music has to the identity of a particular group of people, conclusions which lay persons might perceive as overstated. But one need not construe *community* or *family* as entirely positive or healthy. In the realm of theater, musicals or otherwise, the extent to which the word *community* is used as an instrument to establish relative positionality and value is an important entryway to understanding the social, economic and power dynamics of local theater scenes, which manifest in how individuals and organizations define and present themselves.

Popular culture is replete with examples from film, television and other forms of comedy where "community theater" is used pejoratively, as the butt of a joke. To cite one example, in an eighth season episode of Mystery Science Theater 3000, a comedy show whose premise is built on mocking the incompetence of B-movies, the commenters make numerous jokes about the acting in the episode's feature film *Time Chasers*, an independently produced low-budget science fiction film.[25] In one scene, after the protagonist engages in some forced small-talk with an annoying neighbor character at the grocery store, the latter overacting risibly, Tom Servo (one of the commenters) exclaims "see you at community theatre practice!" in imitation of the woman's shrill voice. This instance is a particularly rich and useful illustration because there are

[25]The relevant portion is from approximately 21:39 to 22:10 of the episode. While this example is from the 1990s, Mystery Science Theater's influence on current review or commentary based comedy is manifest in numerous web series that focus on ridiculing and/or deconstructing low quality films for their camp value as exhibited in popular YouTube series such as Redlettermedia, Cinemassacre, Cinemasins, Thatguywiththeglasses and more recent projects by its own alumni like Rifftrax, and the recent Netflix revival of the original brand.

many layers of humor in a relatively brief segment. The joke expresses not only the gulf between the performances in the film and expectations of acting competence in film-making, but also between the expectations of the stage and screen and the stereotype that those who participate in community theater practices are overzealous and craving of attention beyond what their limited abilities merit.

This perception is not just limited to popular culture or nationally prominent entertainment. Many practitioners of theater, musical and otherwise, struggle with the negative connotations that the phrase community theater conveys, even as they often invoke and celebrate the cultivation of community or *communitas* within and between organizations. Lisa Scheps, co-founder and co-artistic director of the Ground Floor Theatre as well as cohost of the KOOP radio program focused on local Austin theater "Offstage and On the Air" (and who, as she amusingly highlighted to me among her stage credits, is someone who had had the honor of "playing the camel's ass on Broadway" in *Oh Brother!*) describes this challenge for herself:

> I don't think anybody wants to be called *community theater* because it's got such a bad rap. My theater is guilty of it, we consider ourselves a professional theater and our aim is to be an equity theater, but if you want to be literal about things, if you wanna' say that if you're paying people and you're acting professional then you are professional (L. Scheps, personal interview, September 2, 2019).

Scheps, as someone who has experience on Broadway as a performer in her youth while also helping found and administer multiple theatrical organizations, has had experience with many different types of production, and attests to the ambiguity that often arises concerning what is the exact difference between *community* and *professional,* something about which there is a surprising amount of disagreement, even among the highly experienced. As Scheps articulates, the strictest definition of *professional* is often held to be a theater that has some sort of

agreement with Actor's Equity Association and may or may not become a member of one of the collective bargaining associations through which contracts with AEA are negotiated such as the League Of Resident Theaters (LORT, the largest such association in the country), while some might consider any production where the performers are paid for their time as *professional*. Terms like *semi-professional* or even apparent oxymorons like *professional community* are sometimes proffered as a way of transforming a binary into more of a spectrum. Even the different kinds of contracts different professional theaters hold can be used to differentiate and hierarchize them. For example, one of the most common equity contracts outside of LORT is the Small Professional Theater (SPT) agreement, which obviously indicates venues with smaller seating capacity and usually lower budgets.[26] Scheps further discusses the extent to which members of the theater community fail to embrace the label of *community*, while also advocating for how to grow and develop the culture of theater-going and theatrical creation in Austin:

> I absolutely wish I could embrace it [the label of community theater] because there's nothing wrong with being community theater and there's no inherent contradiction in being professional community theater. We don't pay a living wage, to anybody but our desire would be to do that. We have to get Austin to be a theater-going community. I don't think most people in Austin know that we have theater in town, I think if you were to ask most people 'is there theater?' and then ask 'what?' they would say Zach [Zachary Scott] and probably stop there (L. Scheps, personal interview, September 2, 2019).

In fact many participants in the musical theater scene in central Texas, whether onstage performers, producers or fans will often position themselves, their company, or the specific production they are involved in at any time with reference to an implicit or explicit hierarchy of "community" vs. "professional" (at times employing the aforementioned, subjectively defined

[26]As described on AEA's website at https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/contracts/SPT/.

intermediary terms). As an example, during my experience in a summer production of *The Wizard of Oz* at the Zilker Hillside Theatre in 2017, there were numerous backstage discussions about how certain activities and modes of behavior were perceived as more or less "professional." Many members of both the ensemble and principal cast had had experience in productions where it was encouraged, or even implicitly required, to warm up vocally and bodily as a group prior to microphone check during a performance, which was seen as necessary for bonding. The fact that this was mostly foregone (although not expressly forbidden by the production team) in this particular show was seen as a hallmark of the fact that the production was more professional. In other shows in which I had observed or participated, performers who did not join the group for warmups or participate in other similar peer bonding exercises were admonished, harshly criticized, even shamed for undermining the morale and spirit of the show. The fact that, in the minds of many performers and producers of musicals, the values of professional and community are at times not simply divergent but in direct conflict, is one manifestation of the complexity in how they interact.

The habitual contrasting of professional and community, with the latter subordinated and at times even mocked, calls to mind the history and evolution of the term *amateur* in European cultural history. The etymology of amateur, of course, refers merely to "love," i.e. one who engages in a practice because of their enthusiasm for it rather than to earn a living by necessity. In past centuries highly regarded contributors in many artistic fields were often amateurs. The art music of the salon culture of Europe in the 18th and early 19th century was a field where many highly regarded composers, instrumentalists and singers were "amateurs" in the sense they did not depend on their musical practices to support themselves financially. In the twentieth century especially, the connotation of the term shifted towards a lack of the necessary proficiency to be

able to pursue their chosen craft as a subsistence career. In the modern usage *amateur*, while retaining some trace of its original meaning, is more often used to indicate one who is not competent enough to be paid for their work. Ironically this has coincided with the increase in the prominence of the romanticist notion that great art derives from profound inner passion, catharsis and individual emotions. Yet being a "professional" has still come to be conceived as starkly different from doing it "for the love of it."[27]

In the theater scene in central Texas, as is often the case in other areas, organizations engage with discourses of *professional* and *community* values, values which often compete and clash with one another, though are not necessarily mutually exclusive. These specific words, community and professional, are not always employed directly, but they implicitly inform the behavior, interactions and self-characterizations of these organizations and their members often in very subtle and complex ways (at times in very straightforward and obvious ways as well, to be sure). Alongside, and often subsumed within, *professional* and *community* are what I term discourses of *prestige* and *humility* through which the former ideas are often filtered and modulated. To clarify the usage of these concepts, *prestige* encompasses many forms of concrete and abstract capital: artistic value, production quality, distinctiveness of style, etc., that an individual or organization may use to define, promote and position themselves. Prestige is not always synonymous with *professional* but both can include notions of professionalism. *Humility* contrasts with *prestige* in that it refers to the emphasis on the modest, unrefined, quaint, or smaller (literally or figuratively) qualities possessed by a group, a venue, or a production. And

[27] Part of this history, highlighting especially the changes between the 18th and 19th centuries and the discrepancy between the experiences of men and women is described in Theberge *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music, Consuming Technology* (1997): pp. 180-184.

just as *prestige* is not exclusive to or synonymous with *professional*, *humility* is not the sole province of *community* theaters or *community* values.

These ideas can also be linked to the different categories of authenticity proposed by Timothy Taylor in *Global Pop: World Music, World Market*: authenticity of positionality, authenticity of emotionality, and authenticity of primality.[28] With regards to the first of these three, discourses of professional and prestige imply positionality in respect to quality, legitimacy and ranking while discourses of *community* and *humility* imply position relative to more vague and malleable notions of realness, rawness or non-commerciality. Discourses of community and humility tend to be more concerned with authenticity of emotionality, which allows for self-promotion to hide behind, or at least co-occur with apparent self-deprecation. Authenticity of primality i.e. of origins is less applicable to the categories I have proposed here, although the *humility* of one's origins often reinforces a complimentary variety of *prestige*- the humble roots of one's past is often a means to establish via contrast the *prestige* of the present.

My formulation of these concepts is intended to contribute to scholarship that has used music as a focus to analyze the interaction between different types of values, with many past examples especially concerned with economic and cultural value. Scholars in ethnomusicology and sound studies for many years have grappled with the extent to which music variously experiences or resists processes of commodification and thus reification in modern capitalist systems.[29] Arjun Appadurai's theoretical framing outlined in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986) in which he proposes that *things* often alternate between status as commodities and states wherein they fulfill more specific socio-cultural

[28] Taylor, pp. 22-31.
[29] E.g. Jonathan Sterne's *MP3: The Meaning of a Format. Sign, Storage, Transmission* (2012 and Thomas Turino's *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (2008).

roles[30], has been tremendously influential to cultural anthropologists and thus ethnomusicologists. This framing acknowledges the effects of economic systems of value on music while still conceiving of music primarily as a social practice that can never be completely reified. Some scholars have endeavored to use the alternation or vacillation between such value systems to reexamine the question of musical exceptionalism, i.e. the presumption that music has an exceptional role in social life or is an exceptionally meaningful commodity even if one grants it to be such, as in Jayson Beaster-Jones's *Beyond Musical Exceptionalism: Music, Value and Ethnomusicology.* Like Beaster-Jones I would argue that "we need to discuss the values of music commodities as socially and historically situated human phenomena first, rather than accepting the assertions that social, cultural, or normative values are merely epiphenomena of economic exchange."[31] Furthermore, while the value systems I have outlined certainly have economic dimensions, my analysis here has less to do with the question of music as a commodity or even as a *thing* and more with the combined set of behaviors both within and adjacent to musical performance that are intended to express status, position, and identity within and between groups of people.

Other scholars of musical theatre have explored the idea of authenticity specifically in reference to performance and have often discussed it in conjunction with seemingly opposing qualities of camp, exaggeration or heightening of reality. For example, Raymond Knapp argues in *Performance, Authenticity and the Reflexive Idealism of the American Musical* (2011) that discourse surrounding popular music in the West in the mid-twentieth century imputed a kind of authenticity to rock and jazz due to ideological inheritances from nineteenth century German idealism (which is ultimately at the root of Taylor's conceptions as well) that located authenticity

[30] Appadurai, pp. 20-47.
[31] Beaster-Jones, p. 338.

in the most original expressions of the individual subject and especially venerated the music of the working class i.e. of the *volk*. Musical theater came to be perceived as less authentic than blues, jazz or rock due to its emphasis on spectacle, entertainment and artifice and due its more collaborative nature. [32] Knapp and others have offered counters to this understanding of musical theatre's relationship to authenticity but in this chapter I am not solely concerned with what authenticity means for musical theater as it is performed, but rather as one way of understanding a similar and often related set of social constructs that are not limited to the stage.

By examining many behaviors and phenomena outside of, or temporally and spatially in between the actual moments of musical performance, I am also contributing to scholarship that broadens the understanding of which practices and behavior qualify as "musical" or as relevant to music.[33] This and the subsequent chapter especially focus on things that happen offstage, in preparation, in the dressing room, between shows, and the choices made about presentation, self-identity, and branding by those who produce works of musical theater. This chapter takes the Geertzian, hermeneutic approach as applied to the so-called performance text of musical theater in works like Taylor's *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment* and expands the interpretative gaze beyond the onstage performance text.

One such area I have examined concerns the efforts to impose a sense of quality control or rigor through the processes of auditioning, rehearsing and staging a show, which are justified as indices of professional values and professionalism, even when the specific methods may be perceived as harsh and can potentially be undermining to the social bonds and group or

[32] Knapp, pp. 410-413. Many of these ideas are also explored in Chapter 4 of Knapp's *The American Musical And the Performance of Personal Identity* (pp. 164-196).
[33] E.g., Faudree, Paja *Music, Language, and Texts: Sound and Semiotic Ethnography* (2012): in this article Faudree explores how certain practices being considered musical versus linguistic is ideologically constructed and varies from culture to culture.

individual morale that foster *community*. Director Jeff Hinkle, who has worked with several organizations including Austin Theatre Project and City Theatre Austin, and who has a background as an Equity card-carrying actor, has observed the rehearsal and audition processes at many theaters apart from those he has worked at, including several instances where directors, choreographers and other members of the production team in Austin area theaters will downright mistreat their performers to the point where it psychologically undermines them:

> I do often see the weird intersection between community and professional theater. There's a theater, and I'm not going to say their name, who do a lot of musicals and I find them very, very fascinating because sometimes they'll engender this kind of hostile environment with their actors and they'll claim that's because they're a professional theater. And I was an equity actor, I got my equity card when I was 14 years old and I did tours (only did one national tour) but the more professional productions I've been involved in, the less hostility and acrimony you'll have and the more comradery. You may have a director with a massive reputation who comes in who's kind of abusive and that person never works with you again. There's multiple theaters in this town where there's a claim for professionalism and I look at it as intensely unprofessional (J. Hinkle, personal interview, March 17, 2019).

Hinkle elaborates on more specific instances of such behavior, one from a choreographer and another from a director (one of which was from a non-equity theater, the other from one of Austin's few theaters who hold a contract with AEA as a Small Professional Theatre (SPT):

> I was invited to watch a music rehearsal, but the choreographer was just railing and yelling and demeaning these folks and I was like "this is insane." And I thought to myself these are little kids in this show. Another director I know, he has his little clique of folks that he uses and those folks can do no wrong and that's good because they're really good actors but he can just pick on somebody and pick on somebody and then you have people who can't even act anymore who are so worried about fucking up that they can't be in the show, they can't be in the moment. I see these rehearsals where he's yelling or berating people and I think "what are you doing this is not professionalism" there's a perception that this is professionalism from like movies but it's very strange to me (J. Hinkle, personal interview, March 17, 2019).

These observations echo backstage conversations I observed between young women in the ensemble of another local theater which identifies as professional wherein they described a similar pattern of behavior with a former dance teacher who had a tendency to adopt an intense and harsh demeanor and whose verbal criticism flirted with the threshold of abuse. In their description he would target this kind of behavior towards specific students as a kind of perverse favoritism and that he perceived it as necessary and motivational. From their perspective though, this behavior's legitimacy as effective pedagogy was highly questionable. They attributed the (male) teacher's strictness as a product of his own upbringing and training from which he inherited the assumptions about what it means to train people for professional success.

Hinkle contrasts these behaviors with what he characterizes as more authentic professionalism, which he defines based on his own experiences as a performer. In his accounts, strictness to the point of hostility or abusiveness is actually not a particularly common method among professional-level theater directors (though it's certainly not unheard of either), and that often professional productions foster great levels of interpersonal bonding and goodwill as well. Others, though, have observed that similar notions of *professional* values at the expense of cultivating social and communal bonding can and do manifest themselves in solidly professional contexts, and not just among community or semi-professionals attempting to emulate or enact what their perceptions of the professional are. Jonathan Borden, who has many years of experience variously as a keyboardist and music director in a variety of different contexts and with a variety of different organizations including Zachary Scott, The Georgetown Palace Theatre and the now defunct Second Youth Theatre Group, recalls experiences that differed both within and between productions at different places. He observes how performers in different

theatres, from different backgrounds, and/or different points in their careers, interacted with him in his capacities as a supporting musician:

> In the equity houses…..with equity comes ego, sometimes. And I generally don't have problems taking critiques. Usually it's "hey you're playing this too fast" or "this isn't quite the style." At Zach in one production, which I believe was equity, rather than give the comment directly to me that that's not the way it should be done they went to the director and said "this isn't working for me, that music is wrong." So the path to getting to me is different and then of course the director talks to the music director the music director talks to me and it's like well shit why didn't the singer just come directly to me. So the path to getting it is much different and you have to get it right the second time or people get really mad at you. On the other hand with *Putnam* [the Georgetown Palace theatre's 2018 production of *Putnam County spelling Bee*] it was a different production, the singers would turn around say "hey JB I'm not sure this is the right tempo." There were people in that same equity production who had no problem coming directly to me and saying "hey this feels a little slow or can you do an ebb and flow" and we would sit there and we'd work it. So I think the people who were from New York had a specific thing that they were used to but the people that I'd worked with before were used to coming up to me and saying "hey let's do this." So that's an example of how the same show can have different dynamics. But I think direct communication comes from the *community* aspect (J. Borden, personal interview, June 5, 2019).

Hinkle theorizes that the notion of what it means to be professional exhibited in some of the more problematic instances may derive in part from films and from popular culture more broadly, which raises the age-old questions of correlation and cause and of art imitating life or vice versa. There are many examples from Hollywood of the trope of high levels of performance being spurred by adversity and from borderline abusive mentors (e.g., films like *Whiplash*, *The Devil Wears Prada*). Regardless of where this notion spawns from, the fact that multiple organizations of varying statuses will either tolerate individuals who equate professional quality with harshness and intensity, or will outright discourage the types of activities and backstage behavior that have the potential to foster or reinforce group bonding is a testament to how robust these perceptions are.

Some of the interactions between these discourses manifest most starkly when the status of a theater undergoes major changes, either transitioning from community to semi-professional or professional status, expanding its space and facilities, or facing financial, legal or even physical threats to its existence. As just one example, theaters that have established a contract with Actor's Equity and especially ones that have become official members of LORT may build the narrative of their history according to a framework of *actualization*, where the *humility* of their roots is in some way fulfilled by their attainment of their current level of *prestige*. Theaters, or specific productions, that find themselves in financial desperation, or at least in circumstances that necessitate pleas for fundraising support, may emphasize their humble, quaint and homey qualities to garner sympathy or to position themselves in contrast to other theaters vis a vis their possession of a quaint charm that their more well-sponsored counterparts may lack, and while also asserting more idiosyncratic forms of *prestige*.

Many participants in the circle or circles of local theater are quite outspoken about how fraught the relationship between these discourses can be, particularly with regard to stereotypes, assumptions, and even downright stigmas that come attached with them. A performer, friend and castmate in multiple productions, Kristin DeGroot, has often had a lot to say among peers in conversations privately and as part of interviews concerning the effects that different ideas of *community* and *professional* have had for herself as a performer:

> Community theater is wonderful for introducing theater for people who have never done it before, both people who have never been to the theater and who have never participated. It's wonderful for inspiring things in people they may not have realized they enjoyed, it brings out new talents in people, it makes theater accessible to audiences who would have never had access otherwise. As someone who has been in some really great community productions, a lack of budget or a lack of space, it can hamper it somewhat, but I've seen some really wonderful things done. And professional theater is wonderful for elevating that, to taking it to a higher level, a higher artform, for making you realize

> "oh this is the full width of emotion, this is what the full realization of this artform can reach and how amazing it can make me feel, good and bad" and both of these things are really valuable and both necessary and you couldn't have one without the other. *I think the tension only arises when [moment of hesitation**] I think the tension only arises when you try to have the perks of being a professional theater without literally or figuratively paying your dues, and that basically means paying your actors***. (K. DeGroot, personal interview, March 26, 2019).

This statement, in response to her thoughts on both the differences and the potential conflict that can arise between *community* and *professional*, provides many helpful indicators of what they can and do mean to a performer, while also containing, consciously or otherwise, many elements of *prestige* and *humility*. In her description *community* productions and *professional* productions are symbiotic—"you can't have one without the other"— but her characterization of the purpose of community is essentially as a primer, or an introduction to the art form, and perhaps a training ground for both audience and performer alike. *Community* is where the artform is nurtured and developed, where it emerges inchoate, but it is not where it is "elevated" or fully realized. As the domain of discovery or emergence, *community's* value is apparently instrumental in this conceptual framing, it brings people to the practice of the art but it does not fulfill its promise. It is the *humble* roots from which the *prestigious* tree emerges. And as observed historically in the current understanding of *amateur*, in Kristin's mind for an organization and the community it serves to truly enjoy the "perks" (i.e., the *prestige*) of the professional, one should 'pay your dues'; to do otherwise would be inappropriate. She does provide some room for nuance and gradation, as she describes many community productions that were of high quality, and that there are companies aspiring to the *prestige* of a professional theater without doing what in her mind is the necessary step of allowing their performers to be treated as true professionals. Kristin continued to observe that, in her observation "a worrying trend that I've seen more than once is seeing community theaters starting to call themselves

quote ‘regional’ theaters which means professional but they aren’t saying professional because they don’t pay. So their idea is that ‘we’re almost as good as the professionals’ but they can say that without paying their actors.”

One moment in my field experiences where these concepts were both evoked explicitly and contrasted directly with one another came during the rehearsal period for the Spring 2016 Production of Camelot at the Georgetown Palace Theater. The director, then artistic director of the Palace Mary Ellen Butler, used this as an attempt at motivation as we neared opening weekend. She remarked (in paraphrase) that “Right now we are at the level of a very good community production, but we could be the equivalent of very good regional theater production.” The decision to stage Camelot in the first place might be perceived as a statement of intent, as it is a work known for its especially demanding nature due to its length, the complexity of its score and lyrics, and its status within the canon of American musical theater. Furthermore, the historical significance via the work’s association with the Kennedy administration (the soundtrack is attested as being a favorite record of John and Jackie Kennedys’ and their fondness for it contributed to the press and historians’ use of Camelot as the nickname of the administration)[34] and its strong association with the performers who were later deemed ‘iconic’ in musical theater and film history like Julie Andrews, Robert Goulet and Richard Harris makes it even more of an ambitious or *prestigious* selection.

Many of the choices of repertoire at the Palace made over the course of the seasons from 2015 to 2019 reflect a desire to include works that conform to a sense of a historically significant ‘canon’ of musicals, a consideration that is not shared equally in different companies throughout the scene: each season often has at least one “classic” musical e.g. Chicago (Spring of 2015),

[34] Especially apparent in *For President Kennedy An Epilogue*, in LIFE, Dec 6, 1963, pp.158-159.

Camelot (Fall of 2016) 42nd Street (Summer of 2016), West Side Story (spring of 2017), Annie (Fall of 2017) , My Fair lady (Spring of 2018), and the Wizard of Oz (initially scheduled for summer of 2020).[35] While popularity and audience familiarity undoubtedly factor into the programming decisions of the Palace and many other area theaters, The Georgetown Palace Theatre's number of productions (averaging about seven to ten a season) and unique focus on musical theater on its main stage put them in a distinct position in the area to be custodians of the repertory of American musicals. To be sure, each season also has a certain cross section of works that represent many facets of the theaters' identity—the personalities of different directors, the kind of shows that resonate with the audience and the talent pool—but there are always at least a few that are 'classics,' i.e., works whose acclaim and commercial success have endured for many years, if not decades.

Since the Palace is the theater in the greater Austin area that produces the most musicals in a season, and many performers who participate in their productions are also among those who perform in Equity productions elsewhere, the Palace theater has a distinctive position. Much of the labor, performance and otherwise, is volunteer, and yet its production values, as measured in expenditures and subjectively attested by awards nominations and audience praise and testimonials,[36] is higher than those of most theaters in the greater Austin area. It would not be without merit to say that in discussion of both quality and number of shows put on in a season, the Palace often at least rivals nearby professional theaters like Austin Playhouse, TexArts at

[35] These can be viewed in archive postings from ctxlivetheatre.com and the Georgetown palace's website:
http://www.georgetownpalace.com/1819season-2/
http://www.georgetownpalace.com/2017-2018-season/
https://ctxlivetheatre.com/news/2015-2016-georgetown-palace-season/.

[36] The Palace was winner of Broadway World Austin's Theatre of the year (local) award in 2017 and 2018 :
https://www.broadwayworld.com/austin/article/Winners-Announced-For-The-2017-BroadwayWorld-Austin-Awards-Georgetown-Palace-Wins-Theatre-of-the-Year-20180103
https://www.broadwayworld.com/austin/article/Winners-Announced-for-the-2018-BroadwayWorld-Austin-Awards-20190103.

Lakeway or even Zachary Scott. And yet several companies whose resources are not nearly equal to the palace will pay their performers while the Palace currently does not. [37] With some recourse to the gossip mill that some of my informants have been connected to, there are a variety of explanations for this. Various members of the Palace board have been overheard to say that they have considered paying talent but have noted that quality performers seem to keep coming out to audition and perform anyway (and so why bother). Other more disillusioned/embittered former participants at the Palace have reported that the reasoning behind their decision not to pay their actors is that "they [the performers] are not worth it."

Some of this may perhaps be attributable to simple institutional inertia. The Georgetown Palace theater has undoubtedly changed over time, but certain attributes of the institution and the community around it seemed to have changed at different rates. One veteran, Ismael Soto, who has been involved in Palace productions variously as performer, costumer, cosmetician and crew for many years has described the level of production quality and talent as having increased greatly in the more than 10 years he has been involved, on occasion demonstrating such changes to his friends via recorded performances from years past, set in comparison to more recent stagings of the same works. Another veteran gentleman actor described what he saw as a marked shift from earlier to more recent seasons, in particular with regards to the expectations for male performers, saying "it used to be that they would take any guy if you could even sort of sing and remember your lines, now there are a lot more really talented guys coming out." Since the choices of how resources are allocated and funds are spent are in themselves communicative acts, they are also modes of discourse. Money talks, as they say, and so can the withholding of it. The Palace's choice of repertory and overall expenditures are utilized to convey *prestige* and yet

[37] For their mainstage productions at least, somewhat ironically their children's theater productions do pay what other performers consider a reasonable compensation, i.e. more than a minor stipend).

the talent pool is regarded more as a 'volunteer family' who do it *for the love* and thus are discursively defined as both *humble* and *communal*. While the pool of talent, the production budgets, the technical resources and perhaps the audience as well have all grown, neither the specific status nor the identity of the theater has yet shifted from community to professional, which manifests in the attitudes among the administrators towards compensation of performers in particular.

While these values and modes of discourse are not always diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive when they do conflict it can manifest in interpersonal conflicts as well. Another field experience at the Palace highlighted how these phenomena can create conflict, or at the very least unease, resentment and antipathy between members of the same communities. During the winter of 2016, the Georgetown Palace Theatre produced the stage musical adaptation of Disney's *the Little Mermaid* which, as the holiday show of the season was scheduled to include many performances during the weeks of Christmas and New Year's Eve and an unusually lengthy run (nearly forty performances spanning late November to January). While other productions, especially during the Christmas or holiday shows, had included a few double cast parts, for this particular production it was decided to double cast the entire show, which was among the first times this had been done. The rationale behind this decision was to obviate against potential schedule conflicts but in the minds of many of the cast and crew (myself included, as I was one of two actors portraying Prince Eric) the decision created more problems than it solved. Many performers were available for the entire run and played different roles in the different casts, making the burden of lines, choreography and blocking to memorize somewhat imbalanced. While most performances utilized one or the other of the two complete casts, there were enough exceptions due to individual schedule conflicts that people who were

usually in one cast would perform on a few nights with a different cast. While this at times helped boost the comradery between the different sets of personnel, the rehearsals tended to be segregated, such that the exceptions among the performances forced people to perform with others who they had not had as much chance to rehearse with, creating the potential to undermine consistency and cast chemistry. Speaking somewhat euphemistically, the double casting decision also faced the problem that different performers with radically different strengths and weaknesses often were playing the same roles in the different casts, creating at times starkly different audience experiences and performance dynamics depending on which cast they saw on which night. And finally, while there was at least a pretense of the casts being treated equally, it did not prevent many from perceiving that their cast was regarded as the less important of the two (i.e., that there was an A-cast and a B-cast) regardless of how much the collective opinions may or may not have agreed about who was favored and who was not.

It is at this point in discussion of this experience where I must acknowledge once again that as a direct participant in this production, I cannot claim to have a completely disinterested or impartial perspective. However, my personal feelings and recollections are also not necessarily irrelevant were I to attempt to approach this from a completely detached, *etic* viewpoint as much of my personal involvement ties into the perceptions of and communications of *professional* and *community* values, as well as their corollaries of *prestige* and *humility*. In order to demonstrate the extent to which these at time conflicting discourses can manifest in actual forms of human conflict, I thus cannot exclude the conflicts in which I was involved. At one point in the rehearsal process, it became clear that one of the two casts was having some difficulty with one of the group numbers, the Quartet reprise of the song “If Only” which was written especially for the stage adaptation by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman. This was one of the more prominent

new pieces that those who were only familiar with the original animated film would not have heard and was considered a highlight of the show by many in the cast.

Stylistically, this piece is somewhat of a departure for Menken and Ashman and bears more than a slight resemblance to similar group numbers featured in the works of Stephen Sondheim (for example the Now/Later Soon Trio from *A Little Night Music* or the Johanna Quartet Reprise from *Sweeney Todd*): four different characters sing different melodies, some of which are reprises of earlier songs or restate earlier recurrent motifs in the score with each character having a solo feature, and then having all of these themes interwoven together in counterpoint. In the emotional and dramatic arc of the play, this is what has been nicknamed an *all-is-lost* moment: Prince Eric is torn between his growing feelings for Ariel and his obsession with tracking down the mysterious woman who saved his life (not realizing that they are the same person), Ariel feels hopeless that she can convince Eric to fall in love with her without her voice and thus break Ursula's spell, Sebastian wishes he could do something to help or at least comfort Ariel, who he regards as a surrogate daughter, and King Triton despairs that his harsh treatment of Ariel is what drove her to run away from him and that he'll never see her again. Aside from the heightened feelings, the piece is technically challenging because of the tenor range for the male singers, the timing of the different entrances of both the solo and counterpoint sections, and the need for the voices not only to stay in tune but also to blend in contrapuntal lines instead of more traditional (for musical theater) chordal parallel harmonies. Without casting aspersions on any individual specifically, both the director and music director were not confident the casts were adequately prepared when it came time for opening night, and the decision was ultimately made to cut the piece. While I had been part of backstage conversations about this possibility, I was initially led to believe that this applied primarily to the opposite cast as they

seemed to be the ones having more difficulty. I made my dissatisfaction with this decision known, mostly because I felt it was unprofessional to announce a decision like this the night before opening, at what was almost literally the last minute and because it seemed that the decision to cut the number from the opening weekend could have a negative effect on the quality of the show and the morale of the casts.

When it came time to announce this decision to the cast, I knew that the stated reasons for dropping it by the director may not necessarily reflect the entire truth of the situation. I knew, or at least suspected, that it would be unlikely that any individuals who had had obvious struggles would be mentioned by name. However, the director, with whom I had worked with in multiple shows and considered myself to have a mostly amicable and productive relationship, decided that she would make an oblique yet obvious reference to myself when describing the reasons she felt that it was necessary to cut this song, saying "This is a piece that is particularly challenging, even for those of us with master's degrees in music" (she said this knowing that I had a master's degree in ethnomusicology and that most of the cast would be aware of this). Emily Villarreal, a friend of mine from past productions who was also in the cast came to my defense saying "Ummm, I don't think Creighton has been the problem with that song," which created an awkward mood. I realized later that the main reason that Mary Ellen had decided to call me out was that, in essence, she knew that I could take it, and that it would protect the feelings of the others who were more genuinely struggling with this moment in the production.

Later on, I had conversations with another individual in the production who opined that this show and this experience demonstrated that "Basically there are two types of people who are doing shows at the Palace, those who are actually trying to build something significant and professional beyond the Palace itself, and those who are content for it to be their little home,

community theater, and the latter group are starting to resent the former." I realize now that the pragmatic decision to remove an element of a production that would reflect badly on the cast and the organization itself was an attempt at protecting and refining the image and *prestige* of the theatre and its brand, while the specific manner of handling it was an attempt to preserve the confidence, morale and *community* of the cast/s and crew (regardless of how mixed its success may have been). Furthermore, the variation in terms of the skill levels of the various casts' members is itself an instantiation of these discourses. Several members of the casts either had professional credentials and/or aspirations or were of a very high level of technique, while others were somewhat closer to the previously alluded stereotypes of *community theater* performers who view what they do as a hobby and/or have a lower level of proficiency (in either acting, singing or dancing.). Once again, these ideas are not necessarily opposed, but they often interact oppositionally and can adversely affect those who are caught in the crossfire.

Kirk Kelso, a performer who has worked with both professional and community theaters in the area including City Theatre, the Georgetown Palace theatre, Sam Bass Theater and Zachary Scott remarked in an interview that:

> I've kind of experienced both sides of that in a way that community theater can be very supportive until you get good. It's a real thing: suddenly you've gotten an opportunity to do bigger and better things and many people do applaud that and are supportive (they tend to be other actors). But it seems like the higher-ups seem less enthusiastic, and can kind of get a kick out of not casting you, now that you've done something a little bigger. But I don't see [auditioning at a community theater] as "I'll go do this cuz I don't have anything else to do" because I love performing wherever I perform and it's all good, I don't think of performing at any venue any less than performing at a really nice place that's brand spanking new (K. Kelso, personal interview, June 6, 2019).

In a sense my experiences with the Palace theater have come during a time of transition, or at least one of ongoing flux. Whether the historical trajectory of the palace as an institution

and a social conglomeration falls within a certain teleology, i.e. whether it is in the midst an assumed, inevitable transformation from community/amateur to professional is a complex issue. But it is not uncommon for shifts in the status of a theater to take place relatively quickly and there are plenty of neighboring antecedents in the ways other theaters in the area have evolved. Zachary Scott theater, Austin's main equity theater, itself began its life as a community theater. Founded in 1932 as the Austin Civic Theatre and renamed Zachary Scott Theater in 1968, their own website boasts of their institution being the "longest continuously running theater company in the state of Texas," while also noting that they did not achieve professional status with the Actor's Equity Union until the early 1990s.[38] Similarly, San Antonio's "Public Theatre of San Antonio" began life as the San Antonio Dramatic Club and officially incorporated in 1927 as the San Antonio Little Theatre. Amusingly, their website similarly boasts of being "the most historic theater in South Texas,"[39] a competing, if not directly contradictory claim to *prestige* via *primality* as that made by Zach. My own experience with the theater came when it was still known as the San Pedro Playhouse in the 2015-2016 season, and the following season saw it make its own transition to being an Actor's Equity Professional theater and rechristened to the aforementioned Public Theatre of San Antonio. The Georgetown Palace theatre's own promotional literature and media seldom omit the adjective "historic" before the theater's name, a similar assertion of venerability and prestige[40] (albeit *historically* it was a movie theater before being converted to a live theatrical venue) that can easily frame a narrative of actualization should they become an unequivocally professional theater.

[38] http://zachtheatre.org/about/about-zach-theatre/.
[39] http://siteline.vendini.com/site/thepublicsa.org/the-public.
[40] http://www.georgetownpalace.com/history/.

Even once an organization transitions into official professional status, the supposed actualization is sometimes a multi-step process as well. As alluded earlier, aside from having a contract with AEA the *kind* of contract is also part of how *prestige* and positionality are established between professional theaters. This manifests not only in the very literal hierarchical arrangement of these contracts, which are in fact tiered based on a theater's number of seats and budget but also informs the ways in which participants in the local scene spend their time, money and effort. For example the entire state of Texas has only two theaters that are official members of LORT none of which are in central Texas[41] though this is partly a technicality as Zachary Scott's contract is an LOA-LORT (Letters of Agreement) meaning it is an individually negotiated variation of the LORT contract that is considered a transitional arrangement to full membership in LORT[42]. There are several theaters in the Austin and central Texas area however that currently hold the SPT contract including Austin Shakespeare, Austin Playhouse and the Public Theatre of San Antonio while St. Edward's University holds an agreement through URTA (University Resident Theatres Association).[43] While such distinctions rarely were an explicit feature of conversations among performers, directors or fans that I was privy to nearly all of my informants seemed to consider working at LORT or LOA theaters to be more significant opportunities for the advancement of their careers than working at SPT theaters and often described performing at some of the later as stepping stones, or specifically as means for non-

[41]The only official LORT member theaters in Texas are in Dallas and Houston http://lort.org/theatres.

[42] Actor's Equity 2019 regional theatre report describes Zach as planning to "complete it's transition to full LORT status" by 2020 https://actorsequity.org/aboutequity/annualstudy/2017-2018-regional-theatre-report/ActorsEquity_RegionalTheatreReport-2017-2018.pdf#:~:text=AUSTIN%2FSAN%20ANTONIO%20While%20both%20Austin%20and%20San%20Antonio,its%20transition%20to%20full%20LORT%20status%20by%202020.

[43] Other important associations that bargain with Equity include the Council Of Stock Theatres (COST) and Theatres for Young Audiences (TYA) but while there are many theaters throughout Texas that participate in these LOA-LORT, SPT and URTA account for all of the professional theaters in the Central Texas scene. These are listed at AEA's website at https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/contracts/.

Equity members to accrue EMC (Equity Membership Candidacy)[44] points. Several Austin-based friends and colleagues repeatedly embarked on road trips to Houston or the Dallas-Forth Worth area to audition at one of the LORT or LOA theaters in these areas such as the Alley Theatre of Houston or Dallas Theater Center, as well as the more numerous other professional theatres found in these cities.

One of my earliest road trip audition experiences stayed within central Texas though it was my first taste of the urge others had experienced to seek theaters that they perceived as greater in prestige than ones that were more conveniently located for them, and was also yet another experience that illustrated the divergent attitudes and meanings attached to *community* and *professional.* In the Spring of 2016 I was cast in the above-mentioned San Pedro Playhouse's (now Public Theatre of San Antonio) production of Jesus Christ Superstar and decided the experience would be worth the commute between Austin and San Antonio, although I had difficulty justifying it financially. The role paid but did not necessarily equal the expense in gas or in the wear and tear to my car, which I would soon realize was near the end of its operational lifespan (it would in fact die completely before the run completed). As one of the few cast members who did not live in San Antonio, I was an outsider even aside from my comparative lack of pre-fieldwork experiences positioning me as somewhat of an outsider in the realm of live theatre more generally. The director and the costumer were among the only other members of the production who lived in Austin and during introductions, the director made a joke about the coincidence that the three of us were from Austin by facetiously implying and then dispelling the notion that we were in a sense, ringers recruited because of gaps in the local talent pool, "I didn't

[44] The EMC program is something that theaters with many different kinds of Equity agreements participate in. It allows non-members to earn points towards eligibility to join the union. The most current list of participating theaters can be found here https://www.actorsequity.org/images_public/emc_theatres.pdf.

just recruit these people because they're from Austin, don't worry." While there are many aspects of the experience of this production which are topics that I will elaborate on in subsequent chapters, conversations during rehearsals and in the dressing rooms between myself and a few of my castmates concerning their future career paths were stark reminders of the differences in perception between what it means to be *community* or *professional*. My costar, Elise Pardue who portrayed Mary Magdalene discussed her plans to move to California, and particularly about which cities might be considered more "theater towns" than others. At the time she was leaning towards moving to San Diego and she contrasted this choice with other options specifically in terms of where she felt she might be able to progress professionally, stating in very direct and frank terms that "I don't want to be one of those people who is still doing community theater at 30." Many of the men in the cast were older than that and did not either voice or obviously demonstrate disapproval but it was clear that this statement had a strong implication that failing to progress to a professional level by a certain age was at best an indicator that you are of a different level of skill and/or seriousness in the craft, and at worst was something slightly pathetic. Another castmate, Joshua Goldberg who portrayed Pontius Pilate, would later move to Colorado, and we would stay in occasional correspondence. His perspective, while different from Elise's, was that moving from Texas to Colorado was due to the fact that Denver was just a much better so-called theater town than San Antonio or Austin, due to the fact that there were more theaters that paid, and a more supportive economic and cultural climate.

In fact one of the consequences of these perceptions about what it means to be professional or community, is that many people involved in many different roles in theatrical production: actors, directors, writers etc.- might migrate away from Austin and San Antonio, perhaps making the formerly mentioned Dallas and Houston road trips a step towards more

permanent moves, or leaving Texas altogether due to feelings that these are not places that nurture true professional musical theater. I have observed this enervation of talent several times over the course of my fieldwork. Several of my friends and interlocutors are very talented people who have ultimately decided to leave the region in order to pursue careers in cities that have, or are believed to have, better opportunities. Several of them have moved to New York simply because of the belief that the only way to be truly professionally successful in musical theater is inextricable from living and working there. Some of them have made these decisions with little fondness for their experiences in Texas, others simply because they felt they needed to at least attempt to compete at the highest level of the craft even if they felt their chances of, as they say, "making it" were slim. Currently, several of my friends and intermittent castmates, including Kristin DeGroot, after exploring several other possibilities such as Houston, Chicago and Dallas, have decided to make the "Big push" to New York.

Many other of my colleagues have remarked that the theater scene, musical theater in particular, is "growing" in central Texas while at the same time observing the extent to which many theaters are struggling. Recently one of the smaller community theatres, "City Theatre Austin," struggled to recover from being closed down due to building code violations, the nature of which may be as much due to a legal technicality as genuine concern for public safety. Austin Theatre Project, a performing group unattached to a particular venue, is in financial and organizational limbo after ending it's 2016-2017 season. Trinity Street Players, owing to the largesse of the Trinity Baptist church where they are centered, is solvent and healthy but makes recourse to charging other companies rental fees to use their space in order to collect some extra revenue (and admittedly helping companies that cannot afford to, or have temporarily lost, their own venue have access to a performing space). Since my initial involvement with them, both

Trinity Street Players and City Theatre Austin have transitioned from not paying their performers to giving them stipends. Certainly, this growth/expansion, such as it might be described, is not experienced evenly throughout the scene, although it would be a gross oversimplification to say that the distribution of prosperity (or hardship) directly corresponds to a hierarchy of "community" and "professional."

In an email newsletter sent to former supporters, patrons, sponsors, and performers included on City Theatre Austin's email list during its recent crisis (used with permission from Jeff Hinkle), we see an interesting juxtaposition of contrasting modes of self-characterization that are indicative of the delicate balancing many theaters in the area must undertake.:

> This is a difficult message that we hoped to never have to send your way. We'll straight out with it: we need your help. Due to some issues with the City of Austin, we are not currently able to operate in our theatre home. We have tried working through these issues with minimal disruption, but the reality has set in that we're facing a true existential threat. We love our little theatre and hope you do to [sic]. We want city theatre to continue but due to our temporary inability to operate in our space, that simply will not happen without some generous contributions from our friends. We remain optimistic about getting back to providing high quality theatre relatively soon, but in the meantime, we're asking for help."

The proprietor makes liberal use of language that is intended to create associations of comfort, closeness, familiarity; all of the things encompassed within my concept of *humility*. The theater is called "our little theatre," the *our* denoting belonging and communal ownership the *little* emphasizing its quaintness and distinctiveness. At the same time, they state that their purpose is to "provide high quality theatre" which, as an assertion of cultural and economic value that can be contrasted with their more quaint, humble attributes as a mode of presenting *prestige.* Since there is a direct, explicit purpose of eliciting sympathy and convincing potential supporters to make contributions to a crowdsourcing effort, the circumstances of this message are somewhat

exceptional, and yet they are not entirely removed from more day to day concerns as even these seemingly brief insignificant phrases help to frame an entire system of interrelations in which they are embedded.

The remainder of the above message contains a more detailed solicitation of donations through a GoFundMe campaign and an explanation as to the exact nature of its financial and legal hardship. While I considered myself connected to City Theatre, if not necessarily a dyed-in-the-wool member of its proverbial circle or family, other associates in the theatrical community had been critical of the management of the venue and organization such that I was only indirectly and incompletely informed about the events that ultimately precipitated this message from the proprietors prior to receiving it. The message served as a stark reminder of just how precarious the status of certain organizations and the actual physical spaces they inhabit can be and the means of support that smaller places and groups are more likely to need to make recourse to than their more prosperous counterparts.

Once again setting aside a scholarly perspective on the use of language and discourse, this message was not devoid of emotional resonance for myself personally when I received it. My own involvement with City Theatre began in the summer of 2015 when I was cast in their production of *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way To the Forum.* During the fall of the subsequent season I was in their production of *Little Shop of Horrors* and one of City Theatre's frequent directors (Jeff Hinkle) had also directed me in Austin Theatre Project's production of *Sweeney Todd.* I had been in the audience of numerous performances in which friends and collaborators had either been in the cast or involved in other aspects of the production, and had gone out for auditions in which I had not been cast but which I still enjoyed participating in as well. While my experiences were not entirely devoid of frustration or regret, I had enough fond

memories that I was initially dismayed at the prospect that one of the theaters in which I had had so many field related experiences might no longer exist soon. However, appeals for funding and support are not an infrequent occurrence, and while they may represent a certain amount of desperation at times, they are not necessarily a sign of a dire immediate existential threat. CTX Live Theatre's website, among its many other functions, serves as a place where many other similar messages are posted, and in which we can find similar elements of these sets of ideas.

Another archived funding appeal posted to Central Texas Live Theatre's website on behalf of the Mercurial theater in 2016[45] is very different from the message sent by City Theatre, and much of its choice of words and the manner in which the theater decides to position itself derives from differences in the individual character it seeks to project. And yet, again, a message of a few paragraphs contains traces of the same elements of the discourse of *humility* and *prestige*:

> We founded our company with one main goal in mind, to make compelling art. While we have a passion and love for all things stage (and screen), we seek to challenge ourselves and our fellow human beings who share in this experience called 'life'. And to do it we need your help. We don't want to do what is safe. We want to create, to push ourselves, to open our minds and tell a story. And we want to share that experience directly with you. We invite you to share each performing space with us as we explore our similarities and learn from our differences, remembering that we are all one. We are human. We Are Mercurial. We are a found space theatre, willing to perform in warehouses and alleyways, coffee shops and conference rooms. We believe in serving what's best for each production, so each experience is carefully crafted, different and special (ctxlivetheatre.org).

In this case the profile of the theater, their public image, and the repertory they perform is quite different from City Theatre Austin. And yet we see a similarly rich contrast in modes of self-presentation that manifest in the choice of words, and once again illustrates both *humility* and

[45] https://www.ctxlivetheatre.com/news/funding-appeal-mercurial-theatre-austin/.

prestige. The opening paragraph appeals to the values of art as a force to "compel" and "challenge," and specifically rejects the idea that their productions are "safe" (here implicitly meaning free from potential controversy, emotional discomfort, or intellectual laziness, which may be important to emphasize when the status of certain theaters may be determined in part by concerns for actual physical safety). While distinct in their flavor, these words are of course a means of asserting prestige, here given more specificity via its connections to notions of striving to *challenge*, *compel* and *open the minds*, of their patrons. Towards the end of this excerpt we see more emphasis on the theater's humble status; mentions of the fact it is a "found space" theatre, statements that they are willing to perform in a variety of smaller, unconventional venues. This, ingeniously, fuses the discourses and their apparent contradictions together by making humility itself a form of prestige, in this case presenting the humbleness of performance space as an indicator of artistic openness, flexibility and commitment to provide a distinct experience that other theatres may not.

Yet another funding appeal for a specific production from 2016 exhibits yet another iteration of this dynamic. This particular post was made for a partly self-financed production by the artistic director of the Bottle Alley Theatre:

> In the summer of 2012, Bottle Alley Theatre Company was born in the weird and beautiful city of Austin, Texas. Our first show was entitled Stage. Our first season was entitled Prologue, which is defined as an "introductory section." Hello, we were trying to say. This is what you can expect in the future. Stage was set at an infamous venue called The Broken Neck, a warehouse on Austin's eastside, seemingly abandoned from the street-view. A former skatepark and then an occasional underground DIY punk venue, the warehouse was unconditioned, covered in broken glass and graffiti, and mosquitoes came up in droves from the swampy marshland in the back through broken in windows. Amongst the carnage, we felt at home. We sweated and scraped by. The sole bathroom didn't have a light and a hornet's nest was entrenched in a corner. We asked for money then too. Our budget for that entire show was $500 which we got from Kickstarter. We spent it on far too many chairs than we needed, lights, printed programs and posters, and

> bug spray. Lots and lots of bug spray. Our first night we had twenty-something people show up. Our next night (a dark and stormy night) we had six.
> The Broken Neck is gone now. It is a screen-printing company now. So many of our venues are gone as well—Eponymous Garden, where we staged our most famous show, is now a historical shell. Grayduck Gallery has moved from South 1st. Our creative home, Sessions on Mary, is thankfully still around and will be hosting another production company's play soon. Salvage Vanguard, where we once spent an afternoon, learning about puppets, is likewise gone. The Austin theatre community rightfully claims that there is a shortage of performance venues and rehearsal space and they are absolutely right. The number of plays produced seems like it is steadily decreasing. It is harder now than it was when we first began in 2012. Yet we are still here. It feels like we have always been here. We find increasingly odd spaces—a private residence, a barn, a collection of cardboard boxes—and we perform. That is what we do. Our newest offering takes place in a collection of small rooms where no one has ever performed. Our next production will take place in a farm, where likewise no one else has ever performed. If we can say that we are good at one thing, it is being resilient and persisting in our mere existence despite the odds being ever stacked against us.

This posting,[46] aside from providing an alternative perspective about the vitality or growth of the scene (at least at the time of its initial posting), goes into much anecdotal and personal detail about the theater's history and development. This biographical content is crafted to project different modes of *authenticity* and to position their company within the value system of Austin's live music culture. After describing one of its early performance spaces in affectionately deprecating terms it alludes to the space's connection to "DIY punk," which is a subculture that valorizes both literal and figurative concepts of roughness, dirtiness and grit and where, as the poster describes "amongst the carnage we felt at home." Even the opening words of the post are intended to connect the company to the ethos and idiosyncrasies of Austin and its self-branding as the live music capital of the world by stating that they were "born in the weird and beautiful city of Austin." The subsequent sentences detail what in African-American parlance would be called "hustling," i.e., making do with limited economic and material resources.

[46] https://ctxlivetheatre.com/news/funding-appeal-500-to-support-bottle-alley-thea/.

These elements are all meant to align the Bottle Alley Theatre with the concepts of the *authentic* inherited from the confluence of hippie, punk, and underground theater subcultures. In this formulation flaws, imperfections, even poverty and outright deterioration are markers of their adherence to the countercultural, anti-conformist values the Bottle Alley and similar theatres seek (or sought) to align themselves. In the discursive scheme I have proposed, this performance of *authenticity* can tie equally to *prestige* and *humility*, and, as in the immediately preceding example, also mingles them together. To them, all the material and economic privations they describe are what endows their company and the spaces they find and chose with their own variety of quaint charm that is of course very different from that of a place like City Theatre, Trinity Street Players or the like. But this projection of *authenticity* is a tried and true means of conveying artistic merit and value and thus the same qualities contribute to both the *prestigious* and the *humble.*

Another example in the list from a more recent appeal from a UT Workshop production of a recent opera[47], exhibits a significantly different strategy in that it makes much less appeal to sympathy and/or conveying implications of desperation but we can still see traces of the same discourses, albeit somewhat more obliquely and also illustrates similarities and differences between how this manifests with "chamber" works and musicals.

> Help us bring to life a new chamber opera based on the true story of Charley Parkhurst, a famous trans* stagecoach driver in the California Gold Rush! With a lead role sung by trans* opera singer Holden Madagame, this workshop production at UT Austin's Cohen New Works Festival is the culmination of over a year of multidisciplinary collaboration between diverse artists. Your support will help us create a powerful production of an unsung piece of queer history--thank you!
>
> **Project Summary**

[47] Posted on Indiegogo at https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/good-country#/.

Good Country is a chamber opera based on true accounts of Charley Parkhurst, a trans* stagecoach driver during the California Gold Rush. After surviving a holdup, Charley and his passengers tumble into a saloon for a night of revelry and revelations set to a score by Keith Allegretti, libretto by Cecelia Raker, and stage direction by Alice Stanley. Internationally acclaimed tenor and trans* activist Holden Madagame will join a cast of dynamic performers from UT in bringing to life this gripping story of conflict and kept secrets.

With a libretto by Cecelia Raker, music by Keith Allegretti, and stage direction by Alice Stanley, *Good Country* will have its first workshop production as part of UT's Cohen New Works Festival, April 15 - 19.

Through color- and gender-conscious casting, this project will have a significant impact on the community in Austin and beyond, as one of the first operas written with a role specifically tailored for the nuances of trans* classical singers' voices. In addition to creating fantastic new roles for singers of color and bringing an unsung piece of queer history to the stage, this opera has the potential to create future career opportunities for singers whose gender journeys can otherwise limit their careers.

What We Need

Funds from this campaign will go toward paying our cast and musicians, as well as contributing to staging and technical needs. We have generously received a grant from the Fine Arts Diversity Committee at UT to fund travel for Holden Madagame as a guest artist from Germany, and we are currently seeking a means to support the other artists involved in this production.

In terms of its immediate impact, your contribution will help with set and lighting design, artist stipends, public relations, and much more. Every dollar we receive will help make this a more immersive experience for the audience, and a more artistically rewarding one for the performers. Ultimately, your gift will bring an awareness of important issues in the opera world today—diversity in casting, a new understanding of gender norms and voice types, and the portrayal of underrepresented identities—to the University of Texas, to the greater Austin community, and beyond

The varied ways theaters characterize themselves is one indicator of the diversity of the theater scene in Austin and Central Texas, despite the perception that Austin, San Antonio, and the surrounding areas lack sufficiently robust scenes, and which has led many performers to pursue opportunities in other areas. The variation of branding strategies and other presentations of organizational identity is reflected in my firsthand experience as a performer at several of

these theaters. Despite the fact that few of the theaters I have performed at were professional theaters in the strictest sense of having a professional status with the Actor's Equity Association (although my experience with the Public Theatre of San Antonio came the season immediately prior to their transition to professional status, and TexArts at Lakeway is a theater whose Equity status has vacillated), and less than half of the productions I have been in provided any kind of compensation to their performers, each experience was not only different but different in ways that invited comparisons as to their relative positions in the *scene* of live musical theater. Austin Theatre Project, during the time I was involved with them, did not have a venue of their own. In the fall of 2016 their production of *Sweeney Todd* encountered some difficulties both in procuring a space and ensuring that said space was adequately equipped for the performing conditions. Ultimately, *Sweeney Todd* was staged in a warehouse with no centralized air conditioning during a (then) unprecedented October heatwave and we were forced to compensate by engaging a gigantic fan that interfered with the sound balance and acoustics during rehearsals. The cast, however included many performers who were well known and critically acclaimed in the local scene such as Joe Penrod as Sweeney and Kathy Sheridan as Mrs. Lovett.[48]

During my experiences at City Theatre, the performance space was never in question, but other resources often were. During a 2016 production of *Little Shop of Horrors*, it was not until a week and a half before opening night that we had completely secured the set of puppets (and the puppeteer) who would be portraying Audrey II, the monstrous plant who progressively grows over the course of the story. It was a recurring experience during production that technical and budgetary limits would be used by our director, Matthew Burnett (now Matthew Shead), as

[48] https://www.broadwayworld.com/austin/article/BWW-Review-SWEENEY-TODD-THE-DEMON-BARBER-OF-FLEET-STREET-at-Austin-Theatre-Project-20161017, this review describes them as "treasures" of the local community.

catalysts for creative solutions. For example, some of the difficulties that arose from convincingly staging the moments where the plant devoured different characters in the cast contributed to Burnett deciding upon an iconoclastic modifying of the main conceit of the story; while the script as written portrays the main character making morally questionable choices in helping the man-eating plant procure food, Burnett included multiple implications throughout our rendition that in fact Audrey II was only a man-eating monster in Seymour's imagination and that he was in fact simply a homicidal psychopath. For example, rather than having Seymour reluctantly and somewhat unwittingly luring Mr. Mushnik into Audrey II's mouth, Matt chose to have Craig McKerley, the actor portraying Seymour, stab Mr. Mushnik and then throw him into the Plant's waiting maw which made the protagonist much more villainous and less sympathetic, and which was at least in part a response to technical limitations (what this says about how local productions experience and interact with a particular work and its history will be revisited in the fourth chapter).

My very first experience in the local theater scene in the Summer of 2014 was with Trinity Street Players. At this time, they had a mission statement of providing quality theater in downtown Austin for free and thus did not charge for admission (although they did have a donation jar which they would circulate which, in part, would contribute to the actors having a minor tip at the end of the production run), but encountered no major difficulties with procuring musicians, costumes, props, set pieces or other materials that were at times subjects of difficult choices and/or budgetary adjustments in productions at certain other places. And while Trinity's performance space was comparatively small, the artistic quality of the production was held to be

high enough such that it was nominated for a B. Iden Payne award,[49] a *prestigious* local theatrical awards committee.

Based on my several experiences with them, none of these companies had nearly the level of resources at their disposal as the Georgetown Palace Theatre. While the budgets, the critical acclaim, and the technical proficiency of the casts have all varied, Georgetown has often had access to more technical resources than many other nominally community theaters such as video projections and animations, flying rigs, and more expensive and elaborate promotional materials. Aside from Austin's flagship equity venue Zachary Scott and San Antonio's Public Theatre of San Antonio, The Georgetown palace theater also has a higher seat capacity and more satellite facilities than several other Equity-agreement theaters, such as Austin Playhouse and TexArts at Lakeway, including their dance studio, playhouse stage, and education department. Furthermore, I was privy to several instances where audience members made favorable comparisons both to productions I had been a part of or simply observed with equivalent productions at regional theaters or even In New York (though to be sure some of these comments may have been hyperbolic or even disingenuous flattery). These differences are just a small testament to the problems inherent in classifying musical theater according to a strict dichotomy, and even a multi-tiered hierarchy or spectrum is not an entirely adequate metaphor either since several theaters may occupy different positions on different axes (i.e., production budgets, size of performance space, audience, revenue, professional status). Nevertheless, some of the difficulties that practitioners of musical theater often face can be attributed to a highly dichotomized concept of how theater is practiced. Jeff Hinkle compares the evolution of the theater scene in Austin to San Francisco:

[49] http://www.bidenpayneawards.org/single-post/2014/04/02/20132014-Award-Winners.

> What happened to San Francisco in the 70s is actually happening here in Austin, [in the former] you basically had a theater and music scene where you had the bottom of the barrel, people putting plays on in their backyard and then you had the top tier. In Austin that parallel would be people doing plays in their backyard and Zach Scott but you had this whole middle section of small theaters, larger theaters, dinner theaters and then it became too expensive to have those theaters so the top theaters, say the Zach Scott of San Francisco, used to have like the minor leagues where you could groom your talent, develop a fan base and then make it into the big leagues. But now that's all gone, they call it the hollowing out so now you have the professional theater and the people doing plays in their background. And the former will never higher the later. And so you basically have just a cultural void in the center (J. Hinkle, personal interview, March 17, 2019).

Similar effects on other artistic and/or performance-oriented industries such as music and film have been observed on the national level. The diminution of mid-budget feature films while the major studios have focused on the extremely expensive so-called tentpole, blockbuster productions, on the one hand, and comparatively inexpensive microbudget films has been observed since at least the early 2000s[50]. In the realms of music, the lack of willingness of the major record labels to invest in unproven talent at the national level and focus all of their A&R resources on multi-platinum selling popstars at one extreme and more limited distribution talent on subsidiary labels on the other. The extent to which this kind of polarization or *hollowing out* is an inevitable consequence of late capitalism and the corporatization of any industry is well explored and more properly sociological territory of scholarship, but seldom have researchers attempted to examine the manifestations of this phenomenon with regards to theater and drama and seldom from an ethnographic perspective. As public policy has allowed deregulation and

[50] Some of which is described in Jason Bailey's article for Flavorewire: https://www.flavorwire.com/492985/how-the-death-of-mid-budget-cinema-left-a-generation-of-iconic-filmmakers-mia

reduced funding support to the fine arts to intensify alongside the rise of income inequality, and as American culture has tended to devalue artistic pursuits apart from the most prominent celebrity exemplars, professional theaters have increasingly become dependent on corporate sponsorship, which has made them more risk averse, more dismissive of the many gradations that can exist between *community* at its most *humble* level of practice and the solidly *professional*, and increasingly neglecting of local talent in favor of recruiting from New York. As one administrator at Zachary Scott in a career workshop for undergraduates once remarked, he only got his position at Zach after moving to New York even though he was from Austin originally, "I had to move to New York to move across the block."

The relationship of Zach, in particular, to the rest of the theater scene/community has also been described as particularly detached and uninterested. One of my informants (who did not want this particular comment attributed to them directly) even characterized Zach and the aforementioned administrator as "you'll see companies that get up to a point and think 'ok we paid our dues and we're great and everybody else sucks' and I think that's an unfortunate thing." Jonathan Borden who has worked at Zach as well as the Georgetown Palace theater, and other companies (some of which no longer exist) describes it as:

> When I started there, there was a lot more community involvement in that you'd get a wide swath of people to audition. Most of them would not get in because there was a still a high bar to get into a Zach show. Nowadays because they bring in talent from out of town, that has diminished. So now Zach has been pushed to being perceived as a professional house and so that limits the number of community people and it does limit community involvement. People will come see the shows, but they won't participate, even in terms of the musicians. And the majority of times people won't even bother auditioning. And the houses have gotten bigger and that was a little bit of a shame because the Kleberg [the smaller of Zach's two venues] stage had an intimacy that the Topfer [it's mainstage] does not. And so I think they lost *community* which was possibly their intention and they lost intimacy which may or not have been their intention (J. Borden, personal interview, June 5, 2019).

We see yet another example of the discourses of *prestige*, here explicitly the prestige of becoming the primary Equity house of the Austin area perceived by others involved in what Scheps calls the *theater community* as ensconcing themselves and sundering the connections between themselves and other theaters. Borden also inadvertently invokes the discourse of *humility* by lamenting the neglect of the more *intimate* feeling the Zach's smaller stage had (the Kleberg stage is still used particularly for their children's theater or in cases where they lend the stage to other companies). This inverts the narrative of actualization that Zach, the Public Theatre of San Antonio and others use to promote themselves, characterizing ascension to a greater degree of *prestige* as correlating with increased haughtiness, and causing a loss of communal engagement, and also a loss of a certain intimate or *humble* aesthetic quality.

Detachment or disengagement is not a problem exclusive to Zach, or exclusively a product of stratification, as there is a desire among many in the local scene for greater cohesion and alliance between companies and theaters. Performer Susannah Crowell commented in reference to performers and writers struggling to produce and stage local original works that: "there isn't a strong hub of everybody knowing each other and everybody sharing each other's ideas like 'Extra extra read all about it, somebody's writing a musical' it's a really disjointed, really disconnected community overall" (S. Crowell, personal interview, September 8, 2019). Ms. Scheps agrees largely with Crowell's characterization, and further expounds on the potential economic benefits of greater coordination:

> I think it's endemic of the problem with the Austin theater community. When I first moved here and opened my theater, I reached out to other theater companies and venues to say 'let's get together'. The theater community is a great example of a rising tide lifts all boats. When Salvage Vanguard shut down some people said "oh that's gotta be great

> for your theater" and I said "no that's terrible for my theater what would be great for my theater is if two salvage vanguards opened up next to my theater' but we have this opinion of us being in competition with one another and I think that's where the professional vs. community opposition comes in (L. Scheps, personal interview, September 2, 2019).

The logic behind Scheps' description of the economics connects to frustrations voiced by various interlocutors that Austin is not strongly identified with musical theater, or theater of any kind, in the same manner as it is with other kinds of live musical performance. More theaters producing more works in the genre would increase the awareness of the theater scene as a whole among potential audience members, buttress the visibility of individual theaters and thus encourage more people to patronize more venues. This would constitute a shift that would require a greater solidarity and cohesion among those who make musicals: in other words, for the scene to become more collectively motivated and coordinated, a transformation that those like Susannah Crowell believe is sorely needed. It would also likely be facilitated by shifts in local economic policy to incentivize musicals the same way other musical activities have been promoted as part of Austin's tourism branding. As just one example, while the Austin Creative Alliance lists hundreds of theatres and venues, their work only explicitly promotes the performing arts in a highly eclectic and generalized sense[51]. Furthermore the few writers of local original works of musical theater, like Glenna Bowman, have observed that while there is an Austin Songwriting Group to support local songwriters, there is nothing specific to those who aspire to write works of musical theater (her work will be revisited in the fifth chapter).[52] Some sort of inter-company

[51] https://www.nowplayingaustin.com/, and its parent website https://www.austincreativealliance.org/.
[52] Austin Songwriter Group's website has an acoustic guitar neck as part of its logo and many of its contributors use pictures of themselves holding one in community posts, indicating its leaning towards country, folk, rock and blues singer-songwriters: http://austinsongwritersgroup.com/.

unification and solidarity may or may not be an inevitable consequence of Austin's continued population growth.

If, as Kristin DeGroot opined, the purpose of the practice of musical theater at the *community* level is to develop and nurture the talent and the craft, while that of the *professional* level is to actualize and elevate it, the pattern observed in central Texas is that simply remaining local is often itself a barrier to this trajectory of advancement. The presumed sentiment that many performers attribute to those who serve on the boards of Equity theaters and/or those who are present in the audition rooms is "Why would we hire you when we could get someone better from New York? And if you truly are as good, why haven't you moved to New York to prove it." As Kristin narrated to me about at an audition at another Texas theater:

> It was a week before they had replaced their board of directors, everybody on their board. And so a woman came up in front of everybody and I think she was the artistic director and she said "The board of directors does not want to hire local actors. I want to hire local actors, but that means that you have to step up and prove to me that you are good enough to be hired as opposed to actors that we could get from out of state'. Which on the one hand, yes you should be able to prove that you are the best one for the job. But really what she's saying is that you already have a **strike against you by being in this room instead of being in a room in New York** (K. DeGroot, personal interview, March 26, 2019).

Kristin's perspective is of a performer who considers herself a professional, and who is very sensitive about her work being undervalued. This makes her different from many but certainly not all others who have or continue to participate in musical theater at the community level in this scene. If my other acquaintance from the Georgetown Palace Theatre circle is to be believed, there is a tendency for those who help make local musicals but who have little to no professional aspirations to regard performers who do have pretenses of professionalism as arrogant, as prima donnas, or perhaps even as delusional. Her point of view does echo that of

many others I have become acquainted with who lament the difficulty in being able to make a living engaging in a practice that they love. While this is an issue that affects artists of many other categories, musical theater is particularly challenging: it does have slightly more of a niche audience by its nature than live theater generally (Lisa Scheps commented to me that "I know people that will not go to musicals, you rarely hear someone say 'I will not go to straight plays'"), it has weaker unionization than live instrumentalists (while Austin is regarded as the live music capitol of the world, most musicians who actually live in the area do not make their sole living doing it, and yet in every production I have been involved in that has had a live band, the instrumentalists have been paid a decent stipend or wage even when the performers have been completely uncompensated), and it does not have the same degree of elite cultural and artistic respectability as opera or other forms of classical music.

A recent experience performing a one-night road show with the group *Texas Comedies* (alternately known as Crank Collective, who will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 5), provided yet further perspective on why it is that so often stage actors, particularly those involved in musicals, are either expected to perform for free or at least are collectively unwilling to insist that they be compensated. One of my castmates who had spent time in Berlin had observed that "America does not value artists" which is an opinion that was shared by others among the cast who had visited or lived in Europe and other parts of the world. But another explanation that is offered by several of my collaborators is that for many, performing is not just something that they love to do, but is actually something that they *need* in some sense. As Ms. DeGroot described it

> Ultimately what it boils down to is people think actors are replaceable and the reason that they think that is because unfortunately there is this high and there is this need and

> sometimes you'll do anything to get that fix and that includes working for free, and that includes working in unsafe areas and that includes working in places that don't value or respect you (K. DeGroot, personal interview, March 26, 2019).

These propositions, that performers are viewed as, in some sense, disposable and that the reason is in part that doing theatrical work is experienced as some kind of need rather than just a desire, should not be accepted without critical examination, but its prevalence is enough that it cannot be dismissed as a melodramatic cliché either. Discussing musical theater's cultural dynamics, competing discourses, power relations and economics requires some explanation of how and why certain forms of labor are valued differently, how individuals experience and internalize that, and how it shapes their subjectivity and their mindset. Which raises the question: what is it that makes so many practitioners of musical theater willing to do it for free, and how and why do many of them come to perceive it as a *need?*

Chapter 3: The Need to Perform

Over the course of my participant research many of my questions have been difficult to frame as those of disinterested scholarship, even if I were inclined to do so. Ethnomusicology is replete with explorations of the positionality of the researcher, the role of the self in the study of the other, and the at times deeply personal and fraught relationships participant observers have with the subject matter of their research and their collaborators. Some landmark studies included in *Shadows in the Field* include works such as Carol Babiracki's exploration of the role of the researcher in her study of South Asian courtesan singing, Deborah Wong's pioneering *autoethnography* of Taiko drumming, and Tim Rice's examination of the reciprocal expansion of perspectives that occurs in musical mentorships as exemplified in his apprenticeship in the Bulgarian *gaida.*[53] Even some of the earliest influential studies in ethnomusicology foregrounded the researcher's individual immersion and attempted mastery of the musical practice itself, and the importance of the researcher obtaining so-called lived, firsthand knowledge of the tradition they are studying. As far back as 1960 Mantle Hood advocated that an ethnomusicologist should strive to achieve "bi-musicality,"[54] wherein the researcher should seek to cultivate proficiency in both their own native musical tradition (presumably Western/European in the case of those of Hood's generation and soon after) and that of the culture they are studying. More recently Simone Kruger's assessment of the state of the field of Ethnomusicology in *Ethnomusicology in the Academy: An Introduction* is as: "a highly reflexive and self-critical, even self-conscious discipline that distances itself from a focus on musical

[53] Barz and Cooley pp. 167-182, 76-89, and 41-61 are the contributions of Babiracki, Wong, and Rice respectively.
[54] "The Challenge of Bi-Musicality" in *Ethnomusicology* vol. 4, no. 2.

subject matters and instead the epistemological status of the ethnographer's own musicultural experiences" (Kruger: 2009, p. 1) .

From the outset and throughout, I strive to emphasize the extent to which this ethnography is an autoethnography in multiple senses of the word. It is simply not possible for me to discuss musical theater devoid of a sense of personal involvement and, indeed, at times without profound emotion, and thus my pursuits align with musicological scholarship that aims to foreground the experiential, as in this chapter including experiences related to but separate from the performance or the *sound praxis*. Though I am not generally of the post-modernist or post-structuralist persuasion that objectivity, impartiality, or disinterested analysis are always impossibilities or are hegemonic pretenses, the best that I could potentially approach my research in this case is through a modulation and/or alternation between an *etic* and *emic* perspective. In ethnomusicology, perhaps even more so than in cultural anthropology more generally, the "auto" of autoethnography is certainly no longer as much of a novelty or a potential problem as it may have been in decades past, nor as it may continue to be in other fields connected to anthropology and the social sciences. Indeed, not only can one discuss themselves without having to defray accusations of navel-gazing, one is considered remiss if they do not adequately address themselves. This is what most paradigm shifts in anthropology since the *reflexive turn* of the 1970s have been concerned with in some part. Nevertheless, I have often found myself struggling to address how personally involved and connected I have felt to my subject over the course of my research.

Trinh Ti Min Ha influentially characterized her relationship to the culture of the people of Senegal depicted in her documentary film *Reassemblage* as an endeavor "not to speak about but to speak nearby." This statement is one that many modern ethnographers have taken to heart as a

succinct encapsulation of the inherent limits of representing any community that one studies, whether they claim any belonging to it or not. The complexities, problems, and limitations inherent in the task of representation of the self and the other in ethnographic research have even caused some researchers to adopt a paradigm of nonrepresentational ethnography.[55] My own status as a performer, and thus a member of the musical theater scene in central Texas, is not the entirety of my identity, nor of course is membership in the community of musical theater necessarily the only or most important component of the identity of any of those who participate in it. There are, however, shared experiences apart from the mere fact of performing in musicals in itself that I too have shared and so I also feel obliged to mention, in the interest of helping to further establish my positionality with regards to this topic, that I have had personal experiences outside of my research that have made me especially sensitive to the issues related to mental health, disability, addiction and the myriad of topics that are touched on when examining the interaction between music and wellbeing.

I have had several friends and family members, including a cousin who was a promising concert cellist, die from overdoses of painkillers, many years before the mainstream media began to routinely report on America's opioid crisis. I have for several years been in a relationship with a significant other who has struggled with a seemingly intractable combination of chronic physical and mental illness, that has caused them to depend on me heavily for financial, emotional and physical support which has at times negatively impacted my own mental health. Finally, I myself have repeatedly struggled with episodic situational depression, often intensified by the vicissitudes, the highs and lows, of the experiences I have had as a performer. Thus, while I would not presume to *speak for* those who have experienced what I'm describing in this

[55] E.g. Vannini, Phillip. "Non-Representational Ethnography: New Ways of Animating Lifeworlds." *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2015, pp. 317–327.

chapter, my own experiences are certainly a part of them and I would be dishonest if I thought I was only *speaking nearby.* I have, to some extent, been through many of the same things, or at the very least, the same kinds of experiences, as many of my interlocutors, and would not demure from characterizing what I am doing as representation that speaks alongside.

I believe it is vitally important for scholars in the humanities to continue to expand upon the efforts of our predecessors to strive to be open, honest, and to make their own subjectivity, perspective, and mental states available and manifest in their writing. However, I also hope this research and this chapter in particular helps buttress the connection between musicology, ethnomusicology and the disciplines of neuroscience and psychology. I fervently believe that scholars of the humanities should not feel antipathy or avoidance towards the so-called hard sciences, however much it is useful to challenge and problematize the application of empiricism and positivism to art and culture. While a scientific and/or positivist approach does have its shortcomings when it is applied to the study of art and culture, musicologists and ethnomusicologists need not be so dismissive of any attempt to bring science into the conversation, so to speak. As Kay Kaufman Shelemay proposed in *Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music*[56] in 2011:

> That psychologists and neuroscientists are beginning to examine music as a generative force in human development and social bonding provides an important opening for music scholars interested in community construction through music making. If, as has been noted 'growing evidence from neuroscience….suggests that music is biologically powerful, meaning that it can have lasting effects on nonmusical abilities (such as language or attention) during the lifetime of individual humans,' the moment for nuanced historical and ethnographic investigations to help understand the processes is at hand.

[56] *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 349-390.

At the University of Texas at Austin, research that focuses on the links between music and psychology, neuroscience and cognition, is largely the purview of the division of Music and Human Learning, but there is no inherent reason that musicologists and ethnomusicologists cannot involve some discussion of these phenomena in their research. Following from Shelemay's proposal, I hope this study makes a modest contribution to this growing avenue of interdisciplinarity. Though here I am investigating the subjective accounts of individual collaborators, as well as my own experiences, I am relating these to some of what is currently known about the neurochemical effects of music, performance in general, and collaborative social acts, though there are certainly potential ways to investigate the measurable neurological effects of performing on stage in a musical that future research can pursue (whether my own future involvement in such research may take the shape of testing the biometrics of others or having electrodes stuck on myself while on stage remains to be seen).

That music is capable of producing a kind of natural high is well documented, although much of the research on this has only begun to enter into the realm of lay public knowledge in the last fifteen years or so through publications like Oliver Sachs' *Musicophilia* (2007) and Daniel Levitson's *This Is Your Brain On Music* (2006). Practitioners of music therapy (with which I have some experience as a volunteer with Austin's Center for Music Therapy) know that music has efficacy in achieving a calming effect, in facilitating social interaction, and in healing and recovery.[57] Like any pleasurable activity, particularly any activities whose feelings of reward are mediated by the production of dopamine, music can also become addictive. Performing live theater or non-musical live performance of any kind can also stimulate the production of

[57] Stephenson, Jennifer. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities.* Vol. 41, No. 3, September (2006), pp. 290-299.

adrenaline.[58] Some researchers have discussed dopamine as the more problematic of neurotransmitters linked to reward and "natural highs" in contrast to say, serotonin, and in the press it is often linked to compulsive and addictive behavior and mentioned in somewhat alarmist (not entirely unjustifiably so) journalistic pieces about how contemporary technology, media and products are designed by corporations to stimulate dopamine so as to "hack" the reward centers of our brains.[59] Serotonin and oxytocin, in contrast, are at times presented as the chemicals with more healthy, long term benefits linked to meaningful accomplishment, lasting satisfaction, and stable feelings of wellbeing. Like many phenomena, music is connected to many different areas of the brain and neurochemicals, and it is a false dichotomy to assume that music is either an activity that can become an unhealthy addiction or an aid to persistent mental and emotional equilibrium. It depends greatly on a plethora of individual variables.

At a certain point the commonality of the sentiment that doing shows (i.e. being in productions of musical theater) can feel like a need or an addiction, and that doing without them can have a deleterious effect on one's mood, led me to become curious about research in the realms of psychology or neuroscience that might support this phenomenon. Coincidentally enough, Jeff Hinkle, in one of our conversations, without being prompted, alluded to a half-remembered excerpt cited to him by a relative from a long out-of-date edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual's entry for dysthymia that specifically cited performers of musical theater and post-show depression under its entry for dysthymia. This was especially fascinating, since

[58] https://www.genardmethod.com/blog/10-fast-and-effective-ways-to-overcome-stage-fright.
[59] Some examples include the following articles from the Huffington Post and Inc.com https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/clark-russell/dopamine-the-false-promis_b_4787462.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAGJacLOBoqxf5ntZAmrpQB7trVZIZAOuehhqRssA3DoH4Fvw0uWaTc0VCJ4PjpiE48myx3yddEXzUY_QiOBMS67MVc9FEFMcgf6o0pF20NGP17N4TAE_ToGdlrlVN2ieLN6zBP-73Zo9U-SwhK6rIoLq6RM1kPHrUFhLsKTtYxb4
https://www.inc.com/melissa-chu/why-your-brain-prioritizes-instant-gratification-o.html.

neither he nor I had credentials in psychology or neuroscience, and yet we both had independently been impelled to speculate in this direction. Although it later proved elusive to actually confirm which if any of the recent editions of the DSM may have had this entry that Hinkle had mentioned, there is an abundance of research on the relationship between mental illness, depression and creativity and about the extent to which music can induce pleasure, as well as numerous blogs, articles, YouTube videos and forum posts of actors reporting the experience of and the coping mechanisms for post-show depression.[60]

In terms of the former, one of the first studies specifically demonstrating that music can induce the release of dopamine was conducted at the University of McGill in Montreal in 2011, published in *Nature and Neuroscience*. The study found that participants demonstrated a significant increase in dopamine production when listening to music they enjoyed. While this research was cited in many different news outlets, including the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the BBC, *Psychology Today* and others, it was not the first piece of research to propose specific logical connections between established neurological pathways of auditory recognition and the affective states music is known to produce. David Teie's *Human Music A Theoretical Model for How Music Induces Affect* (2010) proposed a mechanism through which many of the constituent aural elements of music correspond with other known pathways of auditory processing and recognition in the brain. This article does not directly measure the production of a neurotransmitter in participants' brains as they listen to music, but proposes many plausible connections between known recognition and reward pathways within the brain, something which, in part, was

[60] A sample of such online discussions include the following:
http://theaterandarts.bangordailynews.com/2016/04/20/home/coping-with-post-show-depression-an-inevitable-process/
https://www.theodysseyonline.com/the-cycles-of-post-show-depression
https://www.onstageblog.com/columns/2015/8/11/post-show-blues-how-to-cure-them
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAQTqakO61c.

ultimately demonstrated by the McGills research, and which has led music psychologists to assert that "music is inextricably linked to our deepest reward systems."[61] Similar to Teie's theoretical framing, mine and my collaborators' experiences can help formulate a plausible logical connection between the mental states experienced during and after productions of musical theater and some of those same deep reward systems.

Apropos to the comparison that many draw between dance and sports, movement, excitement, and being nervous, are mental states well established to trigger the production of adrenaline. Performers who experience stage fright at times engage in practices to minimize the overstimulation of the adrenal glands that can hamper performance when one is excessively nervous, but adrenaline is an inevitable byproduct of any kind of physically or emotionally exciting activity. Being involved with musicals at once entails listening to music one finds pleasurable (*most* of the time at any rate, since people rarely deliberately become involved in shows they do not like, although they may have varied preferences for individual pieces within a show), singing and dancing, often all simultaneously. Thus, it has the potential to stimulate both of these endogenous neurotransmitters, even if one's role is limited to listening and observing on the sidelines or only serving a very specialized role on stage (say as a backup dancer). While the same can be said of many other activities, there is at least one other significant chemical mediation that musical theater is also connected to: oxytocin.

Some of the above-mentioned research is framed through an evolutionary psychological paradigm and the concomitant endeavor to explain *why* music is so prominent and important to humans from a strategic, survival perspective. However, the most significant insight for an

[61] Attributed in BBC's coverage of the McGills research to music psychologist Vicky Williamson from Goldsmith College.

ethnographic and ethnomusicological perspective is how a form of performance functions in and as socialization. Several studies, including two different studies published in *Frontiers of Human Neuroscience* in 2015 and 2017, have shown that the creation of music in a group context, particularly different forms of group singing, can affect the production of oxytocin. The first of these, *The Neurochemistry and Social flow of singing: bonding and oxytocin*, showed that jazz vocal group singers showed increases in levels of oxytocin in their bloodstreams and reduced levels of ACTH (a hormone connected to adrenaline and stress). The second study tested the difference between solo and choral singing activities and found that participants reported reduced stress and greater social bonding, though it showed an inhibition in the production of salivary oxytocin (itself often a response triggered by stress); in both cases musical activities had a demonstrable effect on the production and/or regulation of a hormone most strongly tied to social bonding. While these studies and others like them have helped to establish the basic connections between music and the neurochemistry of pleasure, reward, motivation, stress, arousal and social bonding, the experiences myself and my colleagues have had related to these phenomena show how they are especially relevant to the practice of musical theater.

To allude to the neurochemical effects of stage performance in musical theater, even simply to the extent that they can be inferred from subjective accounts of individual mood states, is not to attempt to justify the value of the practice by demonstrating beneficial effects on cognition, emotional stability or brain chemistry. Nor is doing so just a means to draw attention to an underrecognized potential downside in order to moderate or correct against excessively or uncritically celebratory research that purports to show the benefits of participating in the performing arts. It is merely one way to answer some of the simple, central questions about the people who participate in this practice, a question which has general applicability to music and

performance broadly but has particular significance to those who do musicals in places like Austin, far away from most of the opportunities in the current economic and social climate for any kind of sustainable career in it. What kind of person does this and why do they do it? Why is this practice so attractive to those involved? Why is it so potent a feature of many of their lives? Why do they devote so much time and effort to something hardly any of them can make into a livelihood (whether or not they are even inclined to pursue a career in it)? That musical theater makes people feel good, can get them high, goes at least part of the way towards explaining this. And if it is true that being a part of a stage musical generates its own particular kind of positive feeling, its own kinds of highs, what might be its concomitant drawbacks, it's withdrawals? To begin to pursue the answers, I found it to be necessary to collect and present my various collaborators' perceptions of the phenomena of performance and their feelings about it. If it is true that the economic and cultural dynamics of musical theater, whether in community or professional contexts or in the ambiguous gradations between, are such that performers are undervalued and even treated as disposable, one reason often proposed (as Kristin DeGroot attested previously) is that certain people, in some sense *need* to, or feel that they need to, perform whether or not they will or can be fairly compensated. While fellow actors and singers have contributed somewhat more here, I might reemphasize that *performance* of musical theater is not limited to the actual stage performers and the perspectives of those involved in all levels is both relevant and vital.

One example of a perspective from a contributor who is not a performer comes again from Jonathan Borden. His experiences sitting in many audition rooms, rehearsals and orchestra pits have led him to draw some conclusions about the kind of people who he observes to be attracted to musicals. In his discussions with me, he confided that his own relationship with his

family (his father in particular) was problematic and that for him music was an escape from the adversity of his home life. Borden does not and has never expressed the desire to perform on stage as an actor, but he has a love of musical theater as an art form just as intense from the perspective of an accompanist, bandmember and as a part of numerous production teams. To some extent his comments might appear to conform to and help perpetuate stereotypes that are often applied to 'theater kids,',artists and performers generally but they are nevertheless a valuable insider's insight into the psychology and subjectivity of the practitioners of musical theater:

> I think there's a thousand reasons people get into it, but I think there is a large group like me who came from an abusive family who seek escapism, or people who are looking for a sense of self. For gay people, I can only imagine what it's like being trapped at home with people who don't understand who they are and then there's just people who legitimately enjoy it. But I would hazard a guess, human nature being what it is, if you peeled back people's brains in any given production of 40 people, that a good quarter of those people started musical theater as a form of escape from some type of torment which is sad but also good, because the other thing about theater is that, you can't go to a theater and then be a bully, so the environment you're going to when you escape is going to be fundamentally safe(J. Borden, personal interview, June5, 2019).

Borden's comments with regards to bullying and safety might seem naïve if they are interpreted to mean that theater is a realm devoid of problematic behavior, to say nothing of the complicated interactions between *community* and *professional* that at times manifest in conflict, observed in the previous chapter. It is consistent with my own observations that overt bullying behavior and physical fighting are rare, and while injuries and accidents are not unheard of, (I myself have sustained minor injuries during shows and narrowly avoided serious ones in some cases) I have never observed or participated in any production where anyone deliberately caused harm to another participant. And it is true that overtly combative behavior is most often discouraged due to its corrosive effects on company morale.

Another contributor, Glenna Bowman, co-founder of local LLC SoundBeacon Entertainment who has helped produce and write a few of the locally written original works I have been involved in, shared with me that she has no compunctions characterizing herself in a similar way as Borden characterized both himself and the estimated quarter of the population of auditioners he has encountered over the years, i.e. as someone who came to theater due to trauma and/or neglect in their past:

> For me personally I do love being the center of attention and I don't particularly care how that happens, if that means I can be a producer, and take credit for all these amazing actors who are in the room, or if I can be performing (I know I have certain limitations as a performer, even karaoke I have to pick a song I know all the way through well) . But it doesn't matter what role I'm in as long as I'm the center of attention and that is because I didn't get enough love in my childhood, truly. So some of it is related to my childhood trauma, but that said I was a performer since I was little and some of that got squashed from negative feedback but I do think some people are born that are natural; they walk into a room they smile they have a glow and they're happy to be there but I also know that a lot of actors have their insecurities and maybe everyone has them because we're all humans (G. Bowman, personal interview, July 17, 2019).

These words need not be interpreted merely as self-deprecation or as the expression of an internalized negative stereotype often used by outsiders to demean and dismiss practitioners of the artform, but are part of the complicated narrative of self-definition that many in the musical theater world engage in. While for some the simple enjoyment is enough to explain why they do what they do, and for others it is the deeper satisfaction of honing a craft they have genuine talent for, many frame at least their initial attraction to it as compensating for a fundamental absence in their upbringing and/or in their current lived reality.

Individuals like Bowman and Borden are primarily involved in the creation and production sides of musical theater, but their observations are similar to those often made by onstage performers about themselves and each other, sometimes in exaggerated or facetious

manners, sometimes in moments of serious introspection, and are often a catalyst for reflexive speculation and commentary. Performer and teacher Kera Wright describes how:

> I've had a lot of traumatic experiences in life, but every time I have gone to a therapist that [her childhood] has been the focus or the root of what we've talked about. But the effects on my mood are cyclical and it happens frequently…. My parents divorced when I was very young, my mom remarried someone who was very violent, there was a lot of domestic abuse, I was abused when I was a young child, we were living in extreme poverty, I moved in with my father, we didn't have electricity or heat or air conditioner, we didn't have a stove or a refrigerator and later in life both of my brothers ended up doing stuff where one brother ended up in jail for life with no possibility of parole (K. Wright personal interview, August 30, 2019).

Another performer Veronica Ryan, recounting many backstage and dressing room interactions with fellow performers shares her observations that:

> I have been in many dressing rooms and there was a show recently where I thought to myself "everyone here is a little bit of a drama queen, there's something wrong with these people" and then it came to actual dressing room time and you suddenly hear someone talk about the medication they're on and then you hear so and so who I also thought was crazy is piping up about their meds and the next thing you know half the room is talking about all the meds they take. And I thought "ohhh ok," and it's kind of making me feel bad for thinking these things because mental health is a serious issue and I don't want to contribute to the stigma against it but I also felt like "half of you are on meds because of unaddressed issues" (V. Ryan, personal interview, August 29, 2019)

Ms. Ryan and I have been in multiple productions together at the Georgetown Palace Theatre and my experience in the men's dressing rooms in recent productions is complimentary to hers in that it also exhibits the tendency for these spaces to be occasions where people discuss their personal psychological issues. During the Winter 2018 production of *White Christmas*, myself and several of the other male leads in the cast discussed our relationships with our families, and the subject of fatherhood and of each of our relationships with our fathers was given particular attention. Several cast members, while reluctant to speak in very explicit or specific terms,

expressed that they had had relationships with their fathers or paternal figures that were variously described as “problematic” or “uneasy” My own contribution to one such conversation was punctuated by reciting a joke used from one of George Carlin’s standup routines where he pronounced that “Hell is full o’ dads,” which most of the men laughed or smirked at in acknowledgement.

As with Borden’s estimation about the frequency of “torment” and “trauma” in the background of those he has come to know, these observations are not meant to be used to attempt to generalize from anecdotal experience let alone create a model of probability or correlation between practitioners of musical theater and those who suffer from mental health problems, but simply to help illustrate the significance that many participants accord to the connection the artform has to their own and their peers’ mental states. I invoke the neurological research regarding music, dance, and social activity in order to propose a framework to explain how and why musical theater especially might be sought out by many. The most significant effects and perceptions about them that I have collected fall into three major categories: 1. The pronounced positive feelings in the moment often found during or shortly after performances (and which is naturally most often experienced by onstage actors) and which can variously be described as a *high*, *rush, euphoria* etc.; 2. the depressive effects on mood that are often felt when the run of a show is completed which can be alternately dubbed *post-show depression, slump*, *malaise* or *withdrawal* etc.; and 3. The feeling of interpersonal bonding during a show which is often characterized as a temporary communal connection and often even as a quasi or surrogate familial bonding.

You’re Invincible for Three Minutes

The performer's high that often is attained on stage is certainly not unique to musical theater. Musicians in styles that have no direct relationship to the dramatic arts certainly report experiencing it, as indeed do many kinds of performers who frequently interact with enthusiastically appreciative live audiences. While there is some overlap between performers of musical theater and those who have experience with rock music, choirs, standup comedy and any number of other types of live performance, it is small enough that there have only been a few occasions where an informant has offered a direct comparison to most of these. There are, however, many performers who have worked in both straight drama and musicals in the local scene who do attest to there being a greater rush attained from performing in musicals. One such performer, Kirk Kelso comments that:

> Being able to do a great song is a huge rush and it is different from the rush you get from doing say comedy which I love, and also the intensity of really intense darker conflict on stage, they're all different feelings and I like it all. But my favorite is the big show-busting number… for me something like sit down you're rocking the boat from *Guys and Dolls, Razzle Dazzle in Chicago*. There's a great, great feeling ***like you're invincible for three minutes*** (K. Kelso, personal interview, June 6, 2019).

Kelso goes on to describe in detail the feeling from a performance as the Cowardly Lion in the in Zilker Hillside Theatre's 2017 production of *The Wizard Of Oz:*

> The one incredible night, and it was one of the big audiences we had, one time as soon as the cowardly lion first jumped out, the crowd literally roared, it was like as soon as I jumped out they started applauding and it was amazing and ya know, not that it was me per se, but the cowardly lion's "King of the Forest," I could perform that one all day every day and love every minute of it. And even mild applause from 4000 people…it's a rush, you feel the connection with the audience, ***it's like there's this game and everyone's playing it*** (K. Kelson, personal interview, June 6, 2019).

Kelso's accounts are reminiscent of my own and of others who have felt this same feeling when on stage, although not everyone experiences it in the same kinds of moments. His examples are both moments in shows where an individual is the focus of a "show-busting number," i.e. something whose main purpose is spectacle and where one performer is the primary focus of attention, but this is not the only type of occasion where people report those experiences of euphoria, rush, or intense vicarious catharsis in musicals.

Some other performers have even expressed that straight plays hold little to no interest for them in comparison to musicals, and on at least one occasion I have overheard a performer hyperbolically remark that doing straight plays "kinda make me want to kill myself." Jeff Hinkle's experience directing both straight plays and musicals has convinced him that while performers of many kinds experience this rush, it is particularly acute among musical theater performers:

> The only thing that's very frustrating and interesting (it's frustrating earlier on but now that I accept it as part of the art form it's not) is that in straight plays if someone is say doing *Hamlet*, that is their existence. They don't even think about anything else, when I'm directing musicals, especially early in the rehearsal process, about 80 percent of my actors will be auditioning for about four or five other shows at the same time. But I figured it out, it's that **need to perform** 'I gotta have my next show I've got to have it.' My emotional, artistic needs are being met, but this is going to go away in two months (J. Hinkle, personal interview, March 17, 2019).

Others have voiced slight disagreement with this assessment, saying that what Hinkle describes is something actors, performers and entertainers in many different genres all experience; that actors in straight plays, even if they seem more singularly focused on the part they are currently performing, are also on the hunt for the next fix, so to speak. Lisa Scheps opines that "I would say that's every actor in every show. I think they're always looking for the next show." To some

extent this can be characterized as an inevitable consequence of any gig-based profession or hobby. Scheps does also acknowledge though that "Certainly the very act of harmonizing or singing in unison is going to create a bond and energy that you don't necessarily get in straight plays," which is supported by the previously cited neurological research.

Aside from the individual showcases, or "show-busting" numbers with one member of the principal cast prominently featured, for some these moments of exhilaration happen just as often when they are part of a well synchronized collective onstage segment of performance with a less obvious hierarchy or a more complex dynamic, whether it be the context of a small group number, being part of a large ensemble in a particularly complex piece of singing and dancing, or just being a witness to a particularly potent moment on stage where one becomes especially immersed in their character's reactions and feelings to the scene, and of course to the music. Susannah Crowell, who in addition to being a performer also works as a teacher of young children, echoes Kelso's sentiments that oftentimes: "the number of people in the audience, the bigger the space the bigger you feel and the more power" although she relays that one of her more potent recent experiences came during a small group number in a relatively small venue and crowd:

> Performing in *Annie* [at TexArts in Summer of 2019] I was a cog in a machine in a good way, just doing my work….when I was doing the show I would go and I would do my job together with everybody in all these chorus numbers but In *Easy Street* I felt a little more of it [the performer's high]. I was a supporter but there were just three of us on stage and there were a lot of jokes and I was just nailing a lot of jokes, there was singing there was dancing, it was more just the moments where Lily [her character] was in charge of a moment on stage where the attention was going there and I had to nail something with the humor. She didn't really have her own song or crazy dancing but when a joke would land and I would get a lot of laughter I would feel much differently than if the joke wouldn't quite land, I would keep going nonetheless, It wouldn't affect my performance but it would affect how I felt. ***And my brain was smiling even more when there was a bigger laugh*** (S. Crowell, September 8, 2019).

It is worth pointing out that while Susannah's description may seem to be equally applicable to any comedic performance due to her emphasis on the successful execution of jokes and eliciting of laughter, in this particular song and scene ("Easy Street" from Annie) a lot of the humor is conveyed through the manipulation of the voice both via singing and the timbral quality often employed by those who have played this character (in this case the character Lily St. Regis, who, along with her boyfriend Rooster and Mrs. Hannigan, simultaneously serves as both villain and comic relief in this particular show). Also, while her description downplays the rigorousness of the choreography in this specific rendition, the scene she's describing requires three performers to successfully perform a routine in physical synchronicity as well as in vocal harmony.

The ideal performer in musical theater is often nicknamed a "triple threat" i.e. someone highly trained in acting, singing and dancing. It is natural given this expectation of versatility that different performers will consequently emphasize different aspects that stimulate these intense feelings on stage, depending on what is one's greatest "threat" or what facet one naturally gravitates towards. Crowell's anecdote foregrounds the comedy and movement elements of her experiences, and she also compares it to highs that athletes often attain: "you could compare professional sports players, any athlete really probably has similar feelings, I would say it's definitely a physical sensation, it's like an athletic event, it's an adrenaline rush. With musical theater for a lot of people it's tied into dance. With me too it's usually tied in a lot with dancing, I would say it's like a workout. It's really self-affirming." Crowell does not regard the vocal element as necessarily less important, however, and it is a consistently reported opinion that singing is held to be either *the* most significant contributor, or at least coequal with either movement or drama (depending on the preferences of the individual) as the source of the high.

Veronica Ryan is one who attributes the majority of her gratification to the vocality of performing:

> I feel like when my voice hits a certain range is when I really feel like "Oh I'm giving it everything and that was a really good note, and everyone in here knows it and might be saying to themselves "oh she's here, she's here to sing and she stands out." I think for me it honestly just comes down to singing. Singing has always been my favorite part of it. That's the biggest stress relief for me that I can think of, just belting something, so that's really where I get most of my satisfaction is just letting it out there. But I didn't start out as a singer growing up, I was a background person, dancer and piano player so when I started singing and people were like "oh my god why haven't you been singing?" It was this newfound satisfaction of people noticing me (V. Ryan, personal interview, August 29, 2019).

Ryan also relates the feeling she gets from singing to insights about mainstream society's expectations about adult vs. childish behavior that she has recently reflected on due to becoming a parent. In her view one possible explanation for the feeling of release gained from singing is that it is one of, if not the only, socially acceptable way for an adult to feel what a child feels when they laugh, scream, shout or otherwise vocalize completely without inhibition:

> It's just this utter release. It's like throwing my voice out for the world to hear, because in society it is unacceptable to scream, you can't just go and scream at the top of your lungs. But we all have those moments where we just wanna let everything out, every little emotion out like that. And that is an acceptable way to do it. It's very acceptable to let all of your feelings and emotions out in a very loud voice on stage. And I have a two year old and he'll just sometimes be running around the house just screaming and I'm like "why are you screaming" and I catch myself about to say "inside voice inside voice" but then I think "why am I saying this? I'm the only one here and I don't really care" I guess in public I should turn that down. ***It just makes me think that there aren't instances like that in society as adults to let it out*** (V. Ryan, personal interview, August 29, 2019).

Sarah Danko is another performer experienced in straight plays and musicals who has shared her experiences about the comparisons between the two and who, like Crowell, also compares the experience of staging musicals to sports. She believes the overall feeling and

energy in musicals is heightened compared to other types of theater and that one "has to keep yourself conditioned" in order to do them successfully. Danko also contrasts with Kelso and with Crowell in that she specifically locates her most coveted moments of onstage exhilaration in the most intense, dramatic, and often dark moments expressed through song. Danko's high amount of dramatic training and accomplishment may in part account for this. Many performers in musical theater rank which of their skills is most developed in self-assessments such as "I am an actor who can sing and move" or " I am a dancer who can act and sing" or (as is probably most applicable to myself) "I am a singer who can act and move," and Danko has implied that she would consider herself an actor who can sing and move:

> I come at anything first from an acting perspective. If I have to sing a song I have to communicate with it and feel things and make people feel things with the words that I'm saying and then the notes just embellish what I'm saying. That's how I always come at it…. I have to analyze a song and then just act and then everything else falls into place once I know what I'm saying and who this person is (S. Danko, personal interview, June 17, 2019).

When asked to identify an experience where she felt a particularly pronounced cathartic feeling, Danko describes her experience playing the female lead in the *Ground floor theatre's* 2015 production of *Parade:*

> In *Parade* I played Lucille, and that was really wonderful, it had actually been my first musical in a little while because I am kind of picky with them, I love the darker, deeper ones. The story was just very good, it's about Leo Frank who was a Jewish man in Georgia and he was accused of murdering a girl and he didn't do it but they killed him anyway. There's a part at the end where Lucille is singing and it's after he has died. Throughout the story they find each other and she's been fighting to try to get him out of prison and they end up falling in love by the end and then he dies. She starts the finale of the show and it's her singing and just imagining him still being beside here, and it was really lovely and especially because it's true, that really happened …with musicals especially it's hard. If I want to sing well I have to turn a certain part off so I don't cry

> and sing at the same time and can't get it out. But I have to focus the emotions in a different area into a different place (S. Danko, personal interview, June 17, 2019).

She continues that for her, the experience of simulating the character's trajectory on each night that she performed the piece, combined with the feeling, similar to what Ryan described, of feeling empowered and recognized when one's voice reaches a certain register, volume and power is something unique to musical theater. Describing her portrayal of this character Lucille, Danko explains how:

> She's trying to be a good wife by the standards of 1910, she wants to have a happy marriage and she feels 'I don't think this is going well and I don't know what to do' and then when her husband is getting arrested she fights for him, she goes to the governor's party and calls him out to say you know he really didn't do this so she really stands up for him and finds a voice throughout the show and it's so wonderful to experience it every night, to start small and then find your power and live that…For me, it's really nice to have to belt something up so high and you have to do it so loud **and this is your permission to do this, and to take up that much space and that much volume in a room full of people** (S. Danko, personal interview, June 17, 2019).

Notably in Danko's case, while she describes her approach as most often being driven by the acting choices when approaching a song, she does still specify that it is the buildup and release manifest in the singing that is the most satisfying moment in the performance. Similar to what Ryan describes with regards to her comparison of adult singing to a child's use of their voice without restraint, Danko describes building towards a moment of release in a song as how one gains "permission" to use their vocal instrument to its fullest capacity. All of these examples thus serve as yet another demonstration that while the rush of performing is not unique to musical theater, few performance traditions simultaneously engage the modes of dramatic, comedic, vocal and movement-based performance to the same degree simultaneously.

Closing is Sitting Shiva

Another intermittent castmate and collaborator, Rick Felkins, has described to me some of his insights and experiences about acting in musical theater in particular, though he has had experience in other genres of theater and film as well. Felkins spent much of his earlier career in Los Angeles and now has come to focus on theater with a penchant for musicals in the Austin area, though he does not pursue it as his primary source of income as he did in his earlier life. His other career as of this writing has for many years been as a substance abuse counselor to felons and, like many who have entered that line of work, he had had struggles of his own with addiction when he was younger. He and I had discussed what it felt like to do a show onstage, both how rewarding and how challenging it often can be. Like many others, he gives primary attention to singing in identifying the source of the high he feels from performing:

> I think singing is the purest most direct manipulation of those brain chemicals. I used to sing just because it made me feel good. And then at some point it stopped working as well later in life, maybe just because I got older or whatever, but I always had to sing, not because I had to do it in front of somebody, but I had to sing because it changed my chemistry, it changed my brain chemistry, and I like that, and it made good chemistry happen. And I think that what the audience experiences when they see a musical is something quite similar, there is a high and an excitement and seeing a great big wonderful number. You in Jesus Christ Superstar when you soared those high notes, they get like a [buzzing sound] from it, there's an energy, and it's a heightened energy in musicals, the story's done in a heightened way and the whole audience suspends their disbelief **to go with you on that ride**. And so it's kind of like the crack of performing (R. Felkins, personal interview, April 6, 2019).

As Rick describes, the validation and reciprocation from the audience is an important part of the feeling performers covet, and while levels of enjoyment and engagement may often vary from individual to individual, many in the audience get a rush from what they see the performers able

to do on stage, especially if they are performers themselves in any capacity and witness a particularly impressive demonstration of skill. In this description Felkins used an onomatopoeia of an electrical/buzzing sound to convey his feeling of being energized and impressed by what he saw from the audience during a show.

Performers are often among the most appreciative audience members, and an audience that is not responsive can often affect both the positive feelings of those on stage and often thus the quality of the performance. This phenomenon has been manifested several times in performances that I have participated in. In 2016, during Austin Theatre Project's production of *Sweeney Todd*, my castmate Craig McKerley played Beadle Bamford, the accomplice to the villain Judge Turpin, while I played Anthony Hope, the young(er) romantic lead who's dramatic function is primarily as a means to humanize the titular anti-hero Sweeney, and who, along with Sweeney's daughter Johanna, serve as one of two wholly innocent characters with whom the audience might sympathize. In one scene the Beadle threatens Anthony to stay away from Johanna, who is now the ward of the corrupt Judge, by grabbing a bird which Anthony had bought to bring her as a gift and killing it. While McKerley was supposed to merely grab the prop bird and visibly break its neck, during a performance where his then girlfriend and other fellow musical theater performers were in the audience, McKerley instead made the idiosyncratic choice to actually bite the head off of the prop bird. This evoked a legitimately surprised reaction from me and an audible, honking laugh from his girlfriend in the audience. This, in turn, affected how the two of us decided to play our respective characters with McKerley augmenting the depravity of his character and myself deciding to emphasize Anthony's role as partly an audience surrogate to react in shock to the horrors of the story (I also injected a little more anger

into the subsequent reprise of Johanna, the song Anthony sings to express his resolve to free her from the Judge).

As a contrary example, on a boxing day performance during 2018's production of *White Christmas* at the Georgetown Palace Theatre, the audience hardly responded at all compared to all of the previous showings; few jokes seemed to land, few songs got cheers nor did dance numbers gain much applause. It was the consensus among the cast that, as a result, that particular night was by far our weakest performance. On another occasion during that same production run, one of my castmates, Tim Keating, explained how he made a point of trying to catalyze an enthusiastic cheer from the audience during the overture of any show he saw which he would do in shows he was also a part of from behind the curtain. To him this was a way to improve the overall mood of both the audience and the cast and he considered it an "emotional investment to make sure you're getting your money's worth." As Kelso had said, the audience is also playing the game.

One of the first times a collaborator had talked about the lulls experienced between gigs came during an early conversation with Rick Felkins prior to my research formally beginning. He confided in me that that not only did he believe performing on stage was a route to a very intense "high" but that ending a gig was not unlike going through drug withdrawals. He, in fact, told me that this feeling of coming down after the completion of a performance run was part of the reason he himself had turned to drug use earlier in life. It might seem to be a hyperbolic comparison, and yet it is quite a common one, and the effects are held to be profound by those who experience them such that it cannot be so easily dismissed even in cases where it is evoked facetiously (after all, much truth is said in jest). Indeed, it was Felkins's opinion, one shared by many musicians and stage performers, that the stereotypical correlation between their passion for

their art and drug use has as much to do with the elusiveness in day-to-day life of the more natural high that a performance can stimulate and the inevitable withdrawals/comedowns that the gaps between gigs often create. Rick recounts that after ending his involvement with a particular acting group:

> I loved these people and I admired them and I'm still in touch with some of them….. I had to leave that artistic group and I experienced what I now know because I'm a clinician, a serious depression with the loss of that group. There's a lot of attachment theory that applies to folks involved in drug abuse, and attachment disorder, you don't have that connection, that attachment. And what we were talking about earlier was this need to connect, it's what we do with the audience and when that's gone what does it feel like? So it's like there was this theatrical family that I had a connection with and had an identity with and they knew me and they saw my work and I did some of the best acting I ever did with that group on those stages, witnessing those people and then it was gone. And it was like a death, it had a whole grieving process that took really quite a long time to process and go through. It was fairly profound, but I think it's similar to what a lot of cult members talk about when they leave (R. Felkins, April 6, 2019).

Felkins's expertise in clinical psychology and his experiences with drug abuse and addiction from the perspectives of both the treater and the treated also reinforce Jonathan Borden's assertion that having a broken or disrupted attachment or a lack in one's personal and family life contributes to peoples' pull to participating in this artform. Veronica Ryan, who primarily has performed with the Georgetown Palace Theater for the time she and her family has lived in Texas, also corroborated this:

> I definitely see it as an addiction, and it is really easy for it to be an addiction in Austin and especially at the Palace because they do so many shows in a year that it's like "oh if I didn't enjoy this one I've always got the next one to look forward" and that was not necessarily my experience growing up. All the theaters I ever did shows in growing up, they didn't have a steady stream of shows consistently, the palace does like 12 shows a season (V. Ryan, personal interview, August 29, 2019).

In this case Ryan compares the frequency of opportunities obliquely with the ease of getting the next fix in a proverbial high supply market. But neither Felkins's, Borden's, Ryan's or any other contributor's perspective is that musical theater is the exclusive province of psychologically compromised individuals, inherently addictive personalities, or otherwise "damaged" people but simply that for many people it fulfills a genuine need, a need that many do not or cannot not get from other aspects of their lives.

In some cases, both the positive and negative feelings and memories associated with being involved in a single production are held to be among the most profound experiences in a participant's life. Lisa Scheps, in the same Broadway production in which she had described with facetious pride the honor of having "played the camel's ass," shares the contrast between the feeling of a show opening and closing:

> We closed after three performances and that was after a month and a half at the Kennedy and two weeks of previews. The amazing bond that happened that opening night on Broadway was like Christmas, the endorphins–it was such an amazing feeling, that sense of community and that love, you're going towards a goal together and you're at the apex of that moment, so this was in 1981 and what happens happened on Broadway. Back then the critics came on opening night. The way you find out if your show is a flop is that the open bar suddenly turns into a cash bar, which is exactly what happened to us and that euphoria is a split second down to the floor, so from a mental health standpoint, coming into the theater for the matinee the next day and seeing the closing notice, I would describe it like ***opening night on Broadway is like Christmas and closing is like sitting shiva. It was a wake, it was awful*** (L. Scheps, September 2, 2019).

Scheps' experiences in Austin have mostly been as a director or otherwise on the production side, but she does not draw much differentiation between her personal experiences or those that she has shared and observed here from those she had on Broadway: "I experience it every time….I would say from a mental health perspective the positive aspects linger while the negative aspects are temporary."

I have found attestations of this same sentiment from those who are involved in aspects of production, not just performers, musicians and directors. In a conversation with another close friend who had never been an actor, musician, or performer in any capacity but had often been involved with the stage crew for many different musicals, they described how the bonds formed in and through a production, for the participants at many levels, can be so strong and so missed when the run is completed that the result was something akin to post-partem depression, in their words. This phrasing was as intriguing and evocative as any I'd ever heard because it not only compares the sense of loss to a very measurable biological and neurological phenomenon, but indicates the extent to which the construction, transformation and even partial destruction of self and identity occurs through these practices. Kristin DeGroot provided a slightly contrasting though similar perspective when asked to comment on this feeling:

> I would say it's more like empty nest syndrome because with post partem that implies that once you'd had the baby it's over and that's not quite the case. Following that metaphor, once you've had the baby, the baby comes on stage and that's the good part, it's once the kid leaves and you're alone in the house you're like "Oh, I have nothing." I mean you spend several hours a day there and you essentially go through this weird boot camp with people where you're working long hours and you're exhausted and you eat together and you commiserate together and it creates a bond that I guess you would describe as family rather than just friends necessarily because you're going through hardships together, of a sort (K. DeGroot, personal interview, March 26, 2019).

Ms. Ryan also fittingly compares some of the isolation that has occurred for her between shows to the similarly dramatic impact that having a child had on her social life. One of the commonalities in many of these accounts is attributing the cause to the change in one's social relationships before and after the show. Musical theater at its core is a small community of people working towards a common goal, one with a complex array of tasks and divisions of labor that engages many different types of performing arts and facets of individual personalities,

that requires you to spend many hours several nights a week for multiple months. Even if it did not involve music and the important neurotransmitters that music affects, it is natural that this kind of activity is described in terms like a "boot camp" and that it is held to engender a sense of community and familiality, and is often reflected on in very sentimental terms. The rigor or "boot camp" quality connects to Turner's notion of rites of passage and liminality: the bonding in this case produced by a shared simultaneous rite of passage that produces *communitas*. What becomes difficult is the transition back to the habits and social life one had before the show, something that for many is the primary source of the *post-show slump*. Susannah Crowell, whose word of choice to describe this is as a *crash*, attributes the feeling almost entirely to the people themselves and the social relationships:

> The last few shows I've done I have not as much gotten a crash, whenever you change routine it can mess with you in a couple ways it can really take a toll on mental health; "Ok now what's happening?" any kind of crash I get is from socially missing the people I'm working with because it can become a kind of family and I'm not good at maintaining a social life so that becomes my whole social life and then my social life is gone. I've been really really sensitive to that the last 6 months, the feeling of "Oh, I miss hanging out with these people" (S. Crowell, personal interview, September 8, 2019).

Veronica Ryan similarly describes the peculiar phenomenon of the dissipating of social activity that often happens after a show run has wrapped, i.e. the tendency in her experience for people to just stop hanging out after having gone through a period of spending a great deal of time participating in something that in some manner allows people to get to know each other very quickly:

> I've definitely felt that down, we've all felt that down. You go from hours a day with these people to suddenly cold turkey you don't see them at all unless you make a point to reach out to them but usually by the time a show is over you're so busy with other things that you can't really reach out to them, in the years I've done shows at the Palace there

> are maybe three people who I actually talk to as a person, who actually know me and talk to me about real life, my mom my dad, their families, health, been to their houses, their actual homes. What prevents us from crossing over to becoming friends with them after show? I miss these people terribly and I feel so down so why don't I fix that *down,* why don't I call them up. Why don't we hang out, we have things in common, let's go, it's weird. (V. Ryan, personal interview, August 29, 2019).

For many performers and other members of the crew, their familial, romantic, and core social relationships outside of their art can be deeply affected for better or worse by their commitments to theater, such that in some cases the perspective of a participant's significant other about their moods, habits, and behavior are an important factor to consider as well. Shortly after we had one of our recorded conversations, Veronica Ryan sent me a text message after talking about some of the same topics with her husband (who is not a performer but a frequent and appreciative audience member). In her message she felt compelled to add the observations of her husband and what they'd talked about together, including that: "He tells me that when I'm not in a show I'm not in as good of a mood. Like I'm more irritable and easily agitated. He often tells me to go find a show to do (probably for that very reason)." In some cases, performers have shared episodes of their lives where their romantic relationships have been adversely affected by performing. Many have described situations where they have had romantic and/or sexual flings with their costars, which are often nicknamed "showmances" and which often become complicated once the show ends and which some observers like director and actor Cliff Butler attribute to the potency of the shared experience of staging a musical, especially given how often romantic coupling is treated as the teleology of the character arc for the leads of many musicals . I have also personally observed several instances where so-called showmances have broken up or threatened committed relationships and even marriages. These are also not limited to mere sexual trysts, infatuations, or crushes between onstage performers as I have seen these

kinds of relationships form between performers, crew members, production team or any combination thereof. Kera Wright shares an experience where her yen for performing was a strong contributing factor to the ending of a committed long-term relationship:

> I was in a relationship at the tail end of college where we had been together for six years and he was not very supportive of me performing, whenever I had rehearsal, whenever I was in a show or thinking about auditioning for something it was a big deal and he would get frustrated by the amount of time I was away, so I limited the amount of times I auditioned and the amount of shows that I was in because I felt guilty about not spending time with him, that relationship had its own problems otherwise but that was probably one of the longest depressions I'd been through in my life, just not having any kind of creative release, and it seemed like the daily grind was so repetitive and dull and I just didn't see a point in anything I was doing, and then coming out of that and doing a show for even a brief moment, my attitude my outlook, how much I enjoyed work. I would feel like… refreshed like I had new fresh things that I could teach the kids so I was overall happier but whenever I wasn't in a shows I would fall back down to literally sleeping all day , suicidal thoughts the whole nine yards (K. Wright, personal interview, August 30, 2019).

Not all manifestations of these feelings are equal in magnitude or severity. Some have reported experiences on both sides of the equation–both the high of performing and the withdrawal during the slumps between gigs–that are comparatively mild, and even among the accounts that have been shared with me there are few examples of lasting disability or self-harm, at least in the most obvious, acute manners. Nevertheless, it is part of the persistent experiential, perceptual and subjective impact that participation in musical theater has on people's lives, one that extends beyond the rehearsal, preparation and completion of productions. Seldom do musicological studies have occasion to discuss the impacts of a practice during the periods in between the music-making, when one is *not* doing it, and the complexity of how musicals are made means that for many individuals there can be quite lengthy periods of downtime. Kirk

Kelso's description of how he tends to experience the phenomenon are consistent with it having modestly depressive affects:

> You definitely will eventually run into an opportunity to sit down for a while and go back to life as it was and it's hard. Whenever I take breaks and usually about a month, two months and I always intend to move mountains and for a week after a show I'm shot. I can do my job but then when I go home to do all the things I hadn't been doing, I cannot get up the gumption to do the little things: clean the bathrooms and vacuum the house and work in the yard (K. Kelso, personal interview, June 6, 2019).

Like many others, Kelso also draws his own parallels between his theatrical pursuits and the "jones" of one suffering from an addiction, and describes the pursuit of projects and gigs as similar to the quest to satisfy the fix, even when they have to settle for something that does not fully satisfy their desires. He even explicitly compares other forms of drama as being pale substitutes for musicals and particularly those moments that, as he phrased it earlier, constitute big show busting numbers. Perhaps most amusingly he attests that for him Shakespeare, the genre of live theater which arguably has the greatest presumption of prestige and respectability, is for him a poor substitute for doing a musical and something he only investigates in desperate circumstances. As Kelso remarked during a recent conversation:

> I haven't been in a show since October and it's July now, seven months is about the longest I've gone since I've started and it was challenging, very challenging to not be cast in shows. It was also kind of a double whammy, I'll just go ahead and say my two home theaters City Theatre and the Georgetown Palace Theatre which are the two theaters that had cast me in 8, 9 shows, were not casting and at the same time City Theatre lost their lease and they've kind of been on the lam, they've been kind of doing shows, been kind of not or their season's shortened and you never know where they're going to be [a reference to city theatre's ongoing difficulties with renovation and getting their building up to code alluded to previously] which actual space they've got. So for me the bottom dropped out on my whole casting situation, and I was thinking to myself, "well hmmm. I'm going to have start working on a Shakespearean monologue and start casting lots with some of the Shakespearean companies and try something a little different" (K. Kelso, personal interview, June 6, 2019).

Kelso was the winner of the Central Texas Excellence in Theater awards for his portrayal of Gregory Mitchell in City Theatre's 2015 production of Terence McNally's *Love, Valour, Compassion*, among other accomplishments in straight drama, so his predilection for musicals above Shakespeare is not easy to dismiss as being due to a lack of interest or accomplishment in different modes and styles of acting. While some take a dismissive view of the acting in musical theater, describing it as campy, watered-down or in any number of other disparaging terms (some of which will be revisited in the closing chapter) it does still entail the same work of developing characterization, and creating believable onstage relationships as in non-musical plays, with the added work of learning to dance and sing in harmony and synchronicity with other performers as well. Much of what my interlocutors' accounts have already hinted at is that for many of them the experience of successfully completing the run of a musical instills a feeling of belonging that is communal and at times familial.

It's Like Family

Some of the descriptions shared here contain indications of this sentiment simply as part of the explanation for the comedowns experienced between shows. As Kristin DeGroot described, the rigors of putting on a show are sometimes felt to be similar to bootcamp, while Susannah Crowell discussed how for her it is missing the people who were part of the show as much if not more than missing the high gained from performing that affects her emotional state. Rick Felkins explicitly invoked the word "family" during his description of his experience having a falling out with an acting group and described the severing of those ties as like a grieving process for a loved one. Lisa Scheps' comments elicit familial connotations by comparing opening night of a show to Christmas morning and closing night as a kind of

mourning (humorously employing both Jewish and Irish terminology e.g. that it was like both *shiva* and a wake). While these are all comments made to retroactively explain feelings of loss or of disconnection when going through post-show depression, they represent the fact that musicals have a peculiar tendency to simulate the dynamic of other tightly bonded social groups. In addition to engaging with the dopamine and adrenaline receptors and possibly other endorphins through the combination of pleasurable music, physically demanding movement and audience validation from applause and cheers, the process of making a musical also connects to the pathways that mediate the bonds of affection between human beings grouped together towards a common goal.

During one of my first experiences in the Austin area in the 2014 production of *Fiddler On the Roof* by Trinity Street Players (an experience discussed in more depth in Chapter 4), myself, Sarah Danko and other (then) young adult members of the cast talked about how for many of them it was one of the first productions in a long time that seemed 'like family' to them. Danko and several of the other cast members like Becky Musser had had recent experiences in genres other than musicals, though at the time the sense of connectedness was attributed to the particular group of people. That *Fiddler* is a work strongly associated with themes of family undoubtedly played a part in this as well. For several weeks after the production wrapped, members of the cast kept in touch via a special group email list (partly for the benefit of those who weren't on Facebook or other social media), to promote other works people were involved in, organize get-togethers and otherwise try to maintain the feeling of belonging. While the use of this list ultimately diminished with time (since actors and crew, especially those who have other jobs, often have busy schedules and only see their fellow actors when they get to do shows

with them again), it was one demonstration of an attempt by those who had gone through a shared experience making a musical to maintain the *communitas* created from the show.

This language and these feelings are not limited to specific productions, as theaters and companies have often exhibited a similar dynamic. Immediately prior to one of my first auditions at the Georgetown Palace, I was told by another performer and alumnus of the *Fiddler* production that "You'll find out, it's a family here." This statement utterly eschewed comparative language, saying that the theater *is* a family, not merely that is like one. Over the course of multiple years, several productions and still more auditions and callbacks, I encountered many of the same people recurrently, some of whom also worked in other theaters, but many more who almost exclusively worked at the Palace. Other theaters also often have their recurrent talent pools and similarly show a kind of favoritism to certain auditionees. Sometimes the tightknit quality of a theater manifests in ways that are described as nepotistic to those who react with disappointment to casting decisions that don't favor them. This creates an at times synergistic and at other times conflicting relationship between the communality of a theater or company and that which is achieved in individual productions at said theater or company. The temporary connectedness and sense of belonging often created during a show often impels people to repeatedly audition at the same places, causing people to spend more time and become more involved at other levels with one organization. Conversely people who are already members of an organization in different capacities also audition as performers. The Palace, Zilker Theatre Productions, Austin Playhouse and TexArts at Lakeway are all organizations where members of their recurrent talent pools often serve other roles in productions they do not perform in, or have more permanent roles in those organizations: lighting design, set design, costuming, directing, music directing, crew or even cashiering and ushering. At times though,

this can create a disjunction between those who are felt (by themselves or others) to be insiders and outsiders, since newcomers to a group can feel alienated from the veterans or that they are less a true accepted member of the so-called family. Sometimes this can create cliques, rifts, gossip and resentments from the appearance of undue favoritism or nepotism in casting decisions, the latter of which may be literal as it's not uncommon for actual family members to work together in these contexts as well. Similar to the interactions between *community* and *professional, prestige* and *humility,* the group bond of one production can either clash with or reinforce the larger group identification with the organization.

On multiple occasions, an individual making a decision to work on a production at one theater when it had been expected that they would commit to one at a different theater is an act received as betrayal or disloyalty in a manner that demonstrates the sense of belonging people cultivate within and between shows. The latter created friction between myself and a former castmate when I dropped from a production at the Georgetown Palace Theatre to accept one at Austin Theatre Project, though ultimately our relationship was rehabilitated based on our shared affection for the time we'd spent being part of a different show. Of the performers who have contributed to this chapter, several identify one or more groups as their "home"; e.g., Kelso calling City Theatre and the Georgetown Palace his "home theatres," Veronica Ryan's limiting almost all of her auditions to the latter, while others by habit tend to stick to certain groups even if they have not as overtly described it in the same language: most of Kera Wright's participation in musicals have been through Texas Comedies, Sarah Danko's musicals mostly through Ground Floor, City Theatre and at times Trinity Street Players. In many shows I have been involved in, members will often spend some of the early introductory moments in the first rehearsals listing shows they have done at different venues or companies with different members of their current

cast and crew: e.g., “I’ve been in one show with you, I’ve done two shows with you, I’ve seen you in callbacks before but this is the first time we’ve actually been in a show together.” etc. People who tend towards one or another company’s “family” will often have greater frequency of shared performance experiences, which can impel people to return to audition at places they are more likely to work with and see their friends, or it can discourage people from participation if they perceive an organization as exclusionary or clique-y.

Once again, musical theater is not necessarily entirely unique in this regard. Other performing groups often invoke the language of belonging, communalism and family, but musicals do possess qualities that make them particularly conducive to this phenomenon. Veronica Ryan offered a comparison between musical theater and her experiences in choirs that estimates the personal rewards of doing musicals to be markedly greater, similar to comparisons Kelso and others have made to straight plays:

> When I first moved down here [to Texas] I actually joined the Round Rock Community Choir initially instead of doing theater, and it just wasn’t as satisfying. I found myself connecting more with my castmates in musicals than with people who were just other singers. Maybe it’s because there’s more time to chit chat, you don’t have that in a choir: you do your choir rehearsal, you do your performance and you just sing the whole time because that’s all that people are watching, whereas in shows [musicals] you can be backstage, you can chit chat in down time, in rehearsal, or if they’re working on one scene, you can chit chat with other people over here while that scene’s worked (V. Ryan, personal interview, August 29, 2019).

That Ryan identifies the chit chat and downtime as a possible explanation for why she finds performing in musicals more satisfying than singing with a choir indicates part of what distinguishes musical theater: not simply that it is social, but that it has a peculiar kind of social dynamic. Bands, choirs, dance troupes and other ensembles can require a great commitment of time and resources and engender social bonds between members, but they do not have the intensive, specialized, often highly variegated and separated work of running scenes, songs and

dance routines in potentially highly varied configurations of people. A band or choir will tend to have everyone rehearsing or performing at once in the same space while non-musical stage drama, though it also entails separated scene work, typically does not have as large of casts or as many potential subdivisions of the cast. During rehearsals for a musical, there are often periods where one is called but is waiting to be placed into a scene, or working a number or a scene with a small group in a separate room or hallway before rejoining the whole. And this is not even taking into account completely different people being called on different rehearsal nights. During rehearsals as well as actual performances, many participants will have ample time during the scenes they are not onstage to talk and interact with their castmates, the crew, and any other members of the production nearby. This variably distributed downtime and opportunity for idle conversation is one byproduct of the fact that the task of a production of musical theater is more complex than many other performing arts, and thus potentially more satisfying to pull off successfully. Lisa Scheps frames her experiences in terms of the challenge of the common goal, a goal which engages more parts and more facets of performance tradition, individual personalities and skillsets than most any other type of performing art:

> I've been on Broadway shows that had a cast and crew of a 100 people that felt that way, I've been in shows with a cast and crew of ten people that felt that way, I think it's similar to any case where people are placed in a situation where creation happens you are forced to break down barriers and you're forced to find an intimacy you might not if you're building a widget and that causes bonds that are a little stronger than cohorts in a widget factory (L. Scheps, personal interview, September 2, 2019).

Sometimes the experience of putting on a show is further augmented when it reflects an ethos or mission statement with a positive social agenda, or with a deliberate purpose in representing one or more communities of people in a production. Lisa Scheps has described several of the productions at Ground Floor Theatre, musicals and otherwise, specifically in

relation to how they fulfill the theatre's mission statement to "foster an environment for creative thinkers and artists to produce new works by and for under-represented communities lifting voices that need to be heard to people that need to hear them."[62] In Ground Floor's 2018 production of the musical *Fun Home,* both the choice of the show itself and the decision made about how to produce and cast it were intended to serve the interest of representing Austin's LGBTQ community by producing a musical whose text is explicitly about the formative experiences of a lesbian writer from a dysfunctional family raised by an abusive, closeted gay father. While musicals have been closely linked to ideas of "gay culture," and many celebrated creators have been LGBTQ in some way, few companies in the area have ever produced a show specifically by and about a gay main character and to a large extent about what it's like to be gay in America. They also chose to cast one of the key principal roles with a deaf actress so that the work would also, at least in part, represent the hearing impaired. As Scheps (a transgender woman herself) describes it:

> We produced Fun Home last year, that again has the same kind of intimacy. It's about Allison Bechdel, she wrote a memoir as a graphic novel called Fun Home, she grew up in a very dysfunctional household which makes for the best theater, she is a gay cartoonist, her father was a closeted gay man who committed suicide, their family business was a funeral home which they called the 'fun home' it was taken on by Lisa Krome and Jeanine Tesoir and made into a musical, Allison was played by three different actors, small Alison, medium Alison and adult Alison and it was basically a flashback about her life. Our production was a three quarter round production. I wanted a lot of intimac,y I wanted the audience to be right with us. There's a character called Joan who is college-aged Allison's girlfriend, we hired a deaf actress to play that role and we decided to make the character deaf because Ground Floor Theatre's mission is to produce works by and for underrepresented communities so in this case we were shining a light not only on the LGBTQ community but on the deaf community, so when we started working on this, and it's such a beautiful , intimate piece but we spent a lot of time talking about it and breaking down those barriers, once again we came up with a really tight-knit family. It happens relatively often in my world, I don't know if it happens all the time, especially the musicals we do have been very very special when we finish it we say "Oh my god, we created something important," same thing happened when we did parade in 2015, but

[62] https://www.groundfloortheatre.org/about.

> Fun Home was amazing it was a thinking piece, but everybody we had involved in it spent a lot of time with the undercurrents they needed to think about in portraying these very real people with a lot of emotions and family tied up into it. For example, it's very easy to play the father in the piece very negatively and make him not liked by the audience because he was a terrible father, but if you look at where that came from, it came from pain and he had a lot of self-loathing and pain, therefore Bruce in our production ,even though he was an evil shit the whole time, you felt bad for him when he died. So when we build these kind of characters and are digging so deeply you **can't help but build a community**, we had three kids in the show ages 7 to 12 and still when I see these kids they rush up and hug me**, I was the director so I was mom** (L. Scheps, personal interview, September 2, 2019).

While this story in part attributes the strong relationships forged in and through putting on a show to the ways said show represents one or more communities whose circle extends beyond those of the show community or the show family, once again we see the choice, subconscious or not, of language that eschews simile–Scheps was not like a mother but she "was mom"–putting on the show did not just express information about or strengthen the preexisting bonds of a community, but rather it "can't help but build a community" in itself. Some of the landmark works of ethnomusicology have demonstrated or sought to demonstrate the importance of music's role in culture. Mid-century works by David McCallester, Alan Merriam, and Bruno Nettl were among the first to argue that music can express the values, feelings and ideas of a culture[63]. Later studies like Anthony Seeger's *Why Suya Sing* (1987) argued that music can be even more important than that, that it can have a causal influence on a culture and its development. But perhaps the model most appropriate for understanding musical theater, is one that had one of its earliest and direct articulations by John Miller Chernoff, who described in *African Rhythms and African Sensibilities* that "In the African context, performance in music and

[63] McCallester's *Enemy Way Music* (1954) compiled what he deemed to be the social and communal values that were expressed in Navajo songs and is often credited as being the first to make this argument.

dance responds ultimately to a single aesthetic concern: the realization of community,"[64] i.e., the act of getting together to make music *is* community. Much as musicologists have grappled with complex theorizations of community and the collective (as Kaufman Shelemay's earlier cited article was primarily concerned with) for musicals, the collectivity is very salient and easy to understand. Musical theater's complex organization, subdivisions, variety of labor, harnessing of highly specialized skillsets and incorporation of drama, music and dance makes this straight-forward formulation especially applicable; a company that stages a musical is closer to a tribe or a village than any band or choir, or the smaller and less internally varied casts of most straight plays. A group of people spending a great deal of time together in a confined space with a shared objective is not just a microcosmic illustration of community dynamics, whose value for researchers is merely instrumental for how it can apply to other areas , it ***is*** in fact community in itself, and the fact that most who participate in it miss it terribly when they don't have it in their lives attests to how it taps into some of most fundamental ways the human brain, the brain of a social and communal animal, is wired.

[64] Chernoff p. 149: This work in particular explores how considerations of ethics and social responsibility are articulated in music and dance

Chapter 4: The Pull of the Show

One of the challenges for scholars of musical theater is the multiplicity of scholarly territory in which it could be placed. As much as scholars of art, media, and the humanities may discuss interdisciplinarity and the porosity of boundaries between fields of study, some amount of classification based on an agreed sense of appropriateness is unavoidable. Scholars have approached musical theater from the disciplines of performance studies, historical musicology, film and media studies, cultural history, music theory and composition, and an array of other fields. While less true today than in the past, historical musicologists have tended to study European classical music, and ethnomusicologists have tended to study non-western traditions, with both addressing popular music relatively recently in these fields' histories. Some genres like jazz might be characterized currently as shared (or perhaps disputed) territory. Musical theater, in its nearly two-century history has been perceived as both high art for the elites [65] and populist, commercial entertainment for the masses. It derives from European classical traditions like ballad opera, operetta, and singspiel, but has also intermingled with most of the major watershed genres of Western popular music such as jazz, rock and hip-hop. Despite being a deeply social and communal activity, however, it is underrepresented, indeed nigh-absent in ethnomusicology.

One possible explanation is that whereas most of the popular, folk, and even many of the non-western art music traditions that are typically analyzed in ethnomusicological research tend to be more oriented towards performance, improvisation, and spiritual or communal ritual in contrast to compositions, musical theater is more akin to European art music in that there is a great importance accorded to the realization of lengthy, complex written works. In a sense, for

[65] One indicator locally, UT Austin's lyric opera ensemble has staged two different Sondheim musicals in recent years: *Sweeny Todd* (2014) and *Into the Woods* (2015).

those who perform and participate in musical theater *the work*, or more specifically, *the show*, is ascribed more significance than it is in the practice of say Hindustani raga, Bulgarian gaida, the North American ghost dance, Appalachian folk ballads, or even jazz or rock and roll. Ethnomusicologists have explored the processes whereby ideas of canon and repertory are constructed,[66] but in-depth analysis of long-form works is traditionally more the province of musicologists and music theorists than ethnomusicologists. Many of the above listed styles have at one point or another been proposed as part of a core group of traditions heavily studied in ethnomusicology (themselves sometimes discussed as their own kind of canon), are styles that lack musical notation, are derived primarily from oral tradition, ascribe equal or greater importance to performance and improvisation in the moment than the written form, have repertories of mostly short-form examples, have a canon whose hoariness and obscurity vitiates against veneration of individual authorship, or any combination of these characteristics.

Historical musicology ,in contrast to its sister discipline, though it has become more inclusive of musical genres outside of the European classical tradition and its direct descendants, has still remained largely focused on repertory that includes elaborate, long-form compositions even when such scholarship is not always focused on analysis of such works *as compositions*. Musicological research as far back as works by Susan McClary [67], Gary Tomlinson, and others have deconstructed and problematized the importance of great individuals (and great men especially) and the primacy of authorial intent, while also imbuing the complex political and social interrelations and valences of meaning behind many works of the art music canon rather

[66] E.g. Danielson, Virginia. *The Canon of Ethnomusicology: Is There One?*. Notes, Second Series, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Dec. 2007) pp. 223-231.

[67] McClary's work in *Feminine Endings* (1991) in particular helped draw attention to the way post-Enlightenment bourgeois male experience had been uncritically "universalized" in earlier musicology.

than regard them as transcendent, timeless expressions of inspiration. One of the most influential paradigms in recent years has been reception history, which has helped draw focus away from the veneration of *great men* or any "great," individual creators. But even the post-1980s and 90s paradigm shifts in musicology have not been so radical that in-depth analysis of long, written pieces in the literature of European derived tradition is not still common place[68] (even if the actual music theory and compositional analysis may sometimes take a backseat to social, cultural and political analysis).

An important concept for historical musicologists in the past has been the origin and deconstruction of the concept of *Werktreue,* i.e. the idea of the primacy accorded to the written work, in conjunction with the post-Romantic era's quasi-deification of the author (which in Western music history is often linked to Beethoven specifically). For example, Lydia Goehr's Chapter on the so-called "Beethoven Paradigm" from *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* provides a historical overview of the development of the concept of the discrete, autonomous "work" of music (i.e., a piece that has an singular, conceptual identity independent of its performance and interpretation) in the nineteenth century. As is obvious from the title, she positions Beethoven as one of the major forces for this change. One of the earliest significant factors contributing to the increased importance ascribed to "the work" was the increased possibility for financial independence that came about from the industrial revolution, mass distribution of sheet music and pianos, urban markets, and the decline of the aristocratic patronage systems. In this case Beethoven served as an early exemplar of the archetype of autonomous freelance composer while also the model of the Romantic ideal of profound inner

[68] For example, the previous three volumes of the *Journal of Musicology* include several articles largely about particular long-form works e.g., *Fidelio and the Viennese vogue for Opera comique*, *Representation and Negotiation in Andreas Rauch's Currus Triumphalis Musicus* and *Comic Irony in Harold En Italiie*, and many others are about Western Art music traditions such as opera whose repertory is mostly concerned with long-form works.

expression for its own sake. Composers experienced a tension between satisfying their newfound longing for artistic fulfillment or transcendence and being able to make a living. Treating music as end to itself raised issues of artistic ownership which were reflected by and reinforced by the formation of copyright laws in the middle of the century. Composers also increasingly used notation as a means of rigidly defining a work as belonging to them through increased precision and asserted their new authority through assuming control of titling and dedication. Ultimately, the primacy of the composer and her/his increased assertiveness led to a shift in the priorities of performers and conductors towards fidelity and transparency while influencing changes in modes of reception and audience behavior towards the familiar silent respectful manner of comportment that has held in the art music world to this day. Without all these ways the *Werktreue* could be concretized in practice via the writing, performing and presentation of music, it might not have dominated Western music for as long as it did.

In many histories of musical theater like those of Gerald Mast, Larry Stempell and Geoffrey Block (among others) there is a clear division drawn between the periods before and after the advent of integrated or book musicals. Jerome Kern's *Showboat* and, especially, Roger and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma* are identified as key early examples of works of musical theater constructed holistically, where the songs and dances were deliberately and carefully integrated into the story, and the music, lyrics and book are intended to work cohesively together. Block's book even names the first part of his history of the genre as "Act I: Before Rodgers and Hammerstein" (Block: ix). For musical theater the book musical's supremacy for many years both parallels and descends from the concept of Werktreue and the lingering hold that post-Beethoven deification of the composer as author has had over European/Western music in a broader sense.

Ergo musical theater is no stranger to in-depth analysis of either individual works or of the status and construction of its purported *canon* a la many examples drawn from the literature such as those by Block and Swain. But while my intended contribution has been to examine musical theater as a lived practice: individual, interpersonal, social and communal, such a focus need not disregard or dismiss analysis of shows *as works* in doing so. In fact, the manner in which works are conceptualized and realized by groups of people working together is vitally important to understand the social, affective and experiential dynamics of musical theater. Over the course of my field experiences I have been involved in numerous productions that are well-known from successful Broadway and Hollywood adaptations and thus have a recognizable identity to the people who perform them and come to see them. I have found that in the minds of the audience, producers and performers, pieces of musical theater often do have a life of their own, even if there is not always perfect uniformity in what it means to everyone. A given show may not be a singular, unchanging thing, but instead have a kind of multifarious ontology: it can be many things to many people. My endeavor is to bridge between the earlier auteur-centric, book-and-score-focused works of scholars like Swain and Block and more recent works like those of Bruce Kirle, Carol Oja and Stacy Wolf which are more practice and performance oriented, while also broadening the scope to look at some works that don't strictly fit the mold of the much venerated book musicals to include things like review shows and locally written originals that may or may not conform to the book musical formula of tight integration (most of the latter are to be discussed in the next chapter).

My observations of how people relate to and engage with the shows they put on and see has some kinship with scholarship that has applied Actor Network Theory to the study of music, if only in the sense that I am exploring the extent to which a show as an abstract concept,

independent of the intent and subjectivity of its authors, has an effect despite neither being human or alive (or even a discrete physical object). Some scholarship that has used Actor Network Theory in relation to musical topics includes works by scholars like Benjamin Pieket and Jason Stanyek such as *Deadness: Technologies of the Intermundane*.[69] Actor Network Theory has incurred some criticism for proposing that non-human things can have agency (though proponents would counter that ascribing agency does not imply consciousness, intent or moral equivalence to humans). To this research the concepts of ANT are useful, but only as a shorthand for how works of art affect people; if people think of a Show as having an identity, a personality, as something that encompasses many different meanings and experiences, then for my purposes it does and thus can supplement an understanding of the semiotic and communicative aspects of it. Rather than refer to this as *agency* per se I am employing a notion of *pull* to indicate the competing and counterbalancing *forces* exerted both by a show's history and what the people who produce and perform it bring with them. This term evokes both the gravitational attractions of celestial objects and also the language that people in theater often use to describe their relationships to shows, characters, songs and roles (being *drawn to, attracted to, pulled into* a show, or a role etc.) The people who put it on, the audience expectations, the authorial intent and the collective conceptualization of the work all have *pull* in different directions. Where the equilibrium between these forces ultimately resides varies from one example to another.

The attraction to certain shows also has a relatively simple, straight-forward economic component. Oftentimes particular shows cycle through different companies in an area based on their perceived commercial viability and based on which organizations in the area get the rights

[69] This particular article discusses the use of technology to "revive" performers posthumously and to interact with their descendants. Other works have looked at recording equipment and musical instruments as non-human agents.

to use them at which times. Some examples of this cycling effect of shows through different area theaters in my observation include *Fiddler on the Roof* (staged in 2014 by Trinity Street Players, in 2015 by Lake Travis Music Theatre, in 2017 the Theater Company of Bryan-College Station), *Little Shop of Horrors* (2015 Zilker hillside Theatre, 2016 City Theatre Austin, 2017 the Woodlawn Theatre, Wemberley Players 2018, 2019 Texarts at Lakeway), *The Little Mermaid* (Summer 2016, Woodlawn Theatre, Winter 2016, the Georgetown Palace Theatre, Summer 2018 Emily Ann theatre, Summer 2019 Zilker hillside theater), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Winter 2015 Georgetown Palace Theatre, Spring 2016 Playhouse San Antonio, summer 2017 Wemberley players, Winter 2018 Artsts in progress Theater San Antonio), *West Side Story* (Winter 2015 Woodlawn Theater,Winter 2017 Georgetown Palace Theater, Summer 2017 Emily Anne Theater, *Annie* (Fall 2017 Georgetown Palace Theater, Winter 2018 Woodlawn Theater, Summer 2019 TexArts At Lakeway).[70]

Analyzing works of musical theater in this manner does not necessitate an uncritical attempt to merely reconstruct and revise the purported canon of the art form or an attempt to reclaim Werktreue and the authentic but is simply another way to demonstrate how each of these are constructed. In Knapp's *Performance, Authenticity and Reflexive Idealism*, his proposed reconciliation of the seeming contradictions of the German idealist concept of authenticity with musical theater was presenting what he called the "transformative mode" of authenticity[71] that musical theater encourages a different kind of self-expression that forces the performer to filter and thus transform their individual self through imagined possibilities and the larger framework of the show. Just as transformation and potentialities can be reconciled with individual self-expression so can they be with understandings of *the show* as an enduring entity.

[70] Most of these can once again be accessed in archive postings on ctxlivetheatre.com.
[71] Pp. 412-414.

Obligation, Headlines and Relevance

As mentioned near the beginning of this dissertation, one of my early experiences in the theater scene in the Austin area was participating in a singing and acting workshop class with Adam Roberts, who has been one of my most indispensable consultants throughout my fieldwork, although he has been quoted less prolifically in interviews. From having worked in his class, I was encouraged to audition for the Austin Jewish Repertory theater and Trinity Street Player's joint production of *Fiddler On the Roof* in 2014. I was cast as Perchik alongside several people who would become some of my recurrent castmates, collaborators and friends such as Rick Felkins, Sarah Zeringue, Sarah Danko and Leroy Nienow. My then outsider and/or neophyte status was reinforced when I confessed to my friends in the cast and crew that I was only passingly familiar with the story and score prior to auditioning for this production. At several points during the rehearsal process, there was lengthy discussion about the historical significance, artistic merits, and sentimental and emotional value attached to *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is why it is held to be one of the most prestigious examples of the musical theater repertory. Many of the scholarly books and articles about musical theater's history have included discussion of *Fiddler* as a landmark piece in the history of musical theater[72] and the writing and production of the first run has itself been made into the subject of a best-selling non-fiction book *Wonder of Wonders* (2013) by Alisa Solomon.

The source material for the stage play was *Tevye and His Daughters*, by Sholem Aleichem, a collection of stories about the life of the titular dairy farmer and his daughters in the Russian Jewish *shtettl* of Anatevka. The combined and condensed narrative of the stage rendition

[72] It is extensively discussed in the works of Raymond Knapp, Andrea Most and Gerald Mast to name a few.

ultimately focuses on Tevye's three eldest daughters and their increasing flaunting and deviation from *tradition* (the latter word giving the title of the theme-stating opening number which has been one of the most recognizable and popular songs from the play). His eldest daughter Tzeitel defies the old ways by circumventing a matchmaker to make a commitment to marry her childhood sweetheart Motel. Tevye's next eldest Hodel decides to marry her tutor Perchik, a college educated socialist radical, without first obtaining Tevye's permission. Finally, his third-born daughter, Chavah, decides to marry a non-Jewish man, which for Tevye is something he cannot bring himself to accept. In the background, the Jewish community of Anatevka lives under the threat of an impending pogrom and ultimately a forced expulsion by the Czarist Russian government from the pale of settlement.

Since this production was a joint production with the Austin Jewish Repertory theater, there was an underlying feeling among the cast and the production team that it was important to put on a quality production because we were representing Jewish identity, or at least a work deeply connected to an important part of Jewish culture and history. One contributor to this feeling was that, of the entire cast, only the actress playing Yente the matchmaker, Sue Bilch, was a Jew in the strictest sense, with only a few others having any significant Jewish ancestry or pre-existing education in Judaism/Judaica. For myself it felt at the time simultaneously awkward, humbling, and a privilege to be cast, a sentiment I heard echoed among several of my castmates. It also spurred a renewed interest in my own family history and ethnic heritage and an examination of my complex relationship to Jewish identity and experience. Because my last name is Moench and I have curly, reddish hair, I have often been assumed to be ethnically Jewish, even by Jewish friends and acquaintances. On the other hand, my facial structure, eye color and skin tone have also been characterized as quite *Anglo* or *Germanic* leading to facetious

comments such as that I "look very Aryan," or even that "You could be a poster boy for the Hitler Youth" (in terms of my appearance). This is complicated further by the fact that I have worked part time at the Austin Jewish Community Center's afterschool program. In fact, while I never had occasion to ask either the director or music director directly, I initially suspected that one of the reasons that I was cast was because I was mistaken to be Jewish. My experience with this production catalyzed a renewed interest in my family history, leading me to the discovery that there is some dispute, or at least inconsistency in reporting, about exactly how much, if any, Jewish ancestry I might actually have, which has also stimulated debates with my siblings about whether we could rightly assert any belonging to Jewish culture (part of the ambiguity hinges upon our interpretation of the matrilineal reckoning of Jewishness).

In an event that was unique in my own personal experience throughout my involvement with the area theater scene, the Jewish Community Center set aside a rehearsal period to have Amy Minor from the youth and teen education department at Shalom Austin conduct a session where we (the cast and crew) were taught about Judaism and Jewish culture, not only in terms of how it is practiced currently, but how it would have been practiced in the turn of the twentieth century Russian Empire, and how it has evolved historically. Since most of the cast were *goyim* and it was a co-production with an organization tied to a Christian church, this had the simultaneous purpose of helping buttress our understanding of the characters and period we were portraying and emphasizing the *inter* nature of the production: interfaith, inter- organizational, inter-communal and inter-generational. Since many of the more acclaimed and beloved pieces of music in *Fiddler* accompany Jewish rituals such as the Shabat prayer and the marriage ceremony, it was deemed important that we were all properly educated and informed about what those rituals meant, aside from accompanying some of the pretty, somber melodies Jerry Bock

wrote (e.g. Sabbath Prayer and Sunrise/sunset). Dale Schulz, who portrayed the Rabbi and who is a pastor outside of his theatrical pursuits, also did his own independent research about the gestures and words that would be used during Jewish weddings, and which he uttered on stage during the scene of Motel and Tzeitel's wedding despite the audience not being able or intended to hear them. Sarah Danko, who portrayed Tzeitel, and Becky Musser, who played Hodel, commented that his choices in the blessing scene were "beautiful, sweet and touching" in a way that complemented the music and the scene. In these cases, the aesthetic quality of the pieces within the score interacted with the cultural and religious significance of the moments depicted in the score, and both inspired and worked synergistically with the preparations and performing choices of the group.

One artifact of the historiography of *Fiddler On the Roof* specifically, and of musical theater's *canon* more broadly, is not only *Fiddler's* high critical acclaim, but the tendency for press discussions of it to emphasize the supposed universality of its appeal, even while it has very specific cultural roots**.** Much of this can be found in Alisa Solomon's *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural history of Fiddler on the Roof* (2013), including an anecdote that coincidentally was also repeated to us in some of the early rehearsals for this show. *Fiddler's* book-writer Joseph Stein was asked by one of the Japanese producers during the first non-English production in Tokyo in 1967: "Do they understand this show in America?" to which Stein replied "Yes, of course, we wrote it for America. Why do you ask" "Because it's so Japanese" [73] (Our own production's playbill emphasized this breadth of appeal and purported universality by noting that "Fiddler provides an ideal first collaboration between Trinity Street Players, a sponsored project of the First Baptist Church and the Austin Jewish Repertory Theater, a sponsored project of the

[73] P. 221. Solomon notes in her own footnotes at p. 381 that Sheldon Harnick, the lyricist doubted the veracity of this anecdote.

Jewish Community Association of Austin" in order to highlight the interfaith nature of the collaboration, and further commenting that "there is strength and support inherent in our common faith traditions and symbology, in addition to a beauty that is realized in our individual expressions of them. This collaborative spirit and sharing of cultural pride is precisely what we believe *Fiddler* is longing to teach us."[74]

Certainly the story, characters and themes can be said to have *universal* applicability but much of its content relates to some of the most profound concerns of minority and immigrant experience, many of which are especially rooted in the European Jewish and Jewish-American history and perspective. The tensions between older and younger generations, between innovation and tradition, between loyalty to one's heritage and a desire to define a new, individual identity for oneself are experiences that can be said to be broadly distributed if not near universal in human existence. However, the tragedy and trauma of mob violence, expulsion and exile, while not limited to any one religion, ethnicity or geographical area, are certainly not things that most people who aren't part of an oppressed group can relate to in their day to day lives. Even such lighter challenges like the fraught effort to maintain a tight knit community while being surrounded by a much larger and more powerful majority culture, the experience of chafing against the isolationism and prejudice that living within such a strongly defined subculture can engender, and the sense of loss that parents and children can experience from both vectors as one's customs that have been maintained in spite of generations of adversity are discarded or changed, are all definitely things that not everyone in every audience can equally understand.

[74] From Trinity St. Players' and Austin Jewish Repertory's 2014 playbook for *Fiddler on the Roof*.

In the dressing rooms and backstage there were several conversations about the play's current relevance in light of the plethora of unfortunate pieces of international news that occurred during that summer: It was during that summer that some of the worst initial assaults from the Islamic State occurred,[75] as well as the intensification of the Crimean peninsula conflict ,[76] and bombing campaigns by the Israeli government against Palestinian territory that caused thousands of civilian deaths.[77].The latter events especially, I personally had anticipated may lead to intense political arguments due to the tendency for the discourse in American politics to conflate condemnation of Israeli policies against Palestinians with anti-Semitism, and the inevitability that a church sponsored production in Texas (albeit Austin) would inevitably have some participants who had more conservative political and/or religious leanings. Furthermore, there was certainly an awareness that the existence of the state of Israel would have had profound significance to Jews like those who lived in the fictional Anatevka and would soon find themselves forced from their homes (in fact, in the plot of the play, the character Yente's destination after the villagers are all forced to relocate is said to be the holy land, albeit several decades prior to the establishment of the state of Israel). Surprisingly, most agreed that the broader message against prejudice, dispossession and ethnic cleansing, transcended the historical specificity of the subject matter. Furthermore, the barrage of disheartening signs of the times and their relationship to the themes and subject of *Fiddler* was also reflected in the playbill: "It will probably always be said that Fiddler on the Roof is 'as relevant as ever.' There's certainly truth to that statement in our own 'today' of 2014. It's no secret that the horrific practice of ethnic

[75] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/deadly-car-bomb-attacks-rocks-iraq-north-20146682623969252.html.
[76] https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/02/crimea-crisis-russia-ukraine-cold-war.
[77] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/27/israel-kills-more-palestinians-2014-than-any-other-year-since-1967.

cleansing continues its rampage even now, and that hatred between cultural groups rages as violently as ever. While the pursuit of 'tolerance' for some sees battles won day by day, the War on Prejudice is far from its end."

In our production one of the issues that reflected our collective drive towards a sense of *authenticity* and attempts at faithfulness to *Fiddler* as a work was determining how we as actors and performers should sound. Our director and our music director Adam Roberts, had only minimal suggestions as to what accents we should use, which is always a challenge in period drama. Rick Felkins, who portrayed Tevye, adopted a subtle eastern-European inflected accent but did not attempt to recreate the accent of either Zero Mostel or Topel, whose depictions of Tevye from the original Broadway cast recording and the 1971 film adaptation, respectively, were the most intuitive templates for a performer seeking to hew close to the expectations of nostalgia and shared knowledge. Many of the older members of the cast such as Leroy Nienow (Lazar Wolf) and Sue Bilch took a similar approach. The younger members of the cast debated among ourselves the extent to which we should attempt to approximate Russian Jewish (or non-Jewish Russians in the case of some of the more important ensemble parts) or if we should make efforts to deviate from the older members of the cast to emphasize the generational differences which were a major thematic thrust of the play. Most of the younger players settled on something close to our normal accents, as most of us did not have particularly distinct regional American accents or speech patterns (even those who were from Texas originally). In what would become a surprisingly common piece of advice, it became an axiom that the most important thing was "just don't sound like you're from Texas." In my case, since my character was a somewhat pretentious academic, and in real life I was someone with a post-graduate degree in an obscure field of study, we felt it was particularly appropriate that I did not extensively modify my

speaking voice; “I don’t think you should have too much of a problem sounding like a know-it-all scholar” was a sentiment expressed by multiple members of the production team.

Another component of a work’s identity which often lies outside of the written document but still may derive from the preexisting collection of ideas and precedents encompassed by the shared sense of what *the show* is or is supposed to be, can be found in the movement and choreography**.** A recurrent motif in much of the promotional artwork for *Fiddler* throughout the years has been a moving circle of people to represent the shtetl of Anatevka and the Jewish community in a more general sense. The University of Texas at Austin’s Harry Ransom center includes one of the early design paintings from *Fiddler’s* original 1964 production run included in the Boris Aronson collection (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Set Design Painting for 1964 production of Fiddler on the Roof from Boris Aronson Collection, Harry Ransom Center

This painting depicts the buildings and the village itself as a kind of arch reminiscent of a theater proscenium extending vertically into the sky. The townspeople are variously dancing in small groups, sitting nearby observing, or otherwise engaged in the hustle and bustle of daily

village life. This recalls Tevye's opening monologue where he describes the setting of Anatevka and refers to the Jewish community as "our circle," wherein different members have different prescribed roles and attached expectations. The Trinity Street venue provided a limited amount of stage as it was a black box theater which proved a minor logistical challenge during the theme stating opening number "Tradition," as well as a few other key moments. Adam Roberts, who also served as choreographer devised a routine for the opening based on interlocking layers of diagonal step patterns within a circular trajectory for the whole ensemble. The different groups of people in the village—the papas, the mamas, the sons, the daughters—have their own musical and lyrical motifs that are initially showcased separately and then combined together in counterpoint. During our production, each group stepped through from their prior layer to form a ring at the outer edge of stage during the moment where their group's theme was stated. By the time the different groups converged to sing the vocable unison phrase of "Dai Dai Dai dai, dai dai dai dai, dai dai dai dai, dai dai dai dai dai" the formation merged to create a connected and

closed single circle containing every member of the ensemble.

Figure 2: Photo from 2014 Trinity St. Players Production: Circular dance depicting everyday life in Anatevka during "Tradition"

The above photo captures the moment where the elder male members of the ensemble, who appropriately are assigned to the roles of "the papas," have stepped forward from their previous staggered positions within the formation to sing their featured line. The parallel between this choreography and the visual motifs inherited from the art work and promotional material of past productions reflects the fecundity of accrued precedent attached to the work that is *Fiddler On the Roof,* yet another aspect that is connected to, yet also separate from, its existence as a published, copyrighted piece of intellectual property created by specific authors. Another indicator of the interaction between the specific new, rendition peculiar to this

performing group and its then current moment and the inheritance of prior meanings and ideas, Adam Roberts also instructed each cast member to determine their own posture, gestures and visible quirks to engage in during key moments of the choreography. This was in order to imbue a more specific and idiosyncratic quality to each person on top of the prescribed patterns for their respective groups and also as a common character-building exercise for each of the performers.

This experience demonstrated the extent to which the status of a show in the genre's canon, the applicability of the themes of its story, and the particular cultural heritage it both draws from and contributes to, all *pull* a company towards approaching the staging of a show with a sense of reverence that manifests in choices that are made at all levels. Adam Roberts's thematically expressive choreography, the actors' collective choices in dialect and accent, the surreptitious character choices like Dale Schulz's inaudible prayers, and the processing of the songs and scenes in the show through how they relate the contemporary events and yet unresolved social issues all exhibit the influence the collective idea of the show exerts.

Changing Times, Feeling the Spirit

The seriousness of the subject matter, the issues behind representing a history and culture that many of us did not definitively belong to, the high critical acclaim and frequency of revivals reinforcing the status of *Fiddler* as a mainstay of the repertory of the art form of American musicals (2014 also marked the 50th Anniversary of *Fiddler's* original Broadway run), and the poignancy of its specific story, are all contributing factors to a sense of gravitas, and, as I have characterized, of *pull* or gravity in our production, even though it was *just* community theater. While these qualities are especially present in the example of *Fiddler on The Roof*, there are a myriad of qualities that can imbue a work with its *a priori* identity apart from, though often

packaged with, the pre-written dimensions of it. While the efforts of scholars to historicize and deconstruct *Werktreue* and the primacy of the author in Western music have helped to foreground performance, interpretation, reception and the socio-cultural dynamics of music, my experiences have repeatedly reinforced that the conception of and importance of the work/the show is often very robust in the minds of the practitioners of musical theater, even as audience members and performers are acutely aware of the variations inevitable in the process of creating something in the moment out of something that also exists in some prescriptive document or documents. Furthermore, even though each person's concept of a particular show may differ slightly in their individual minds the process of collaborating and forming a consensus inevitably preserves even as it changes.

At times, how people relate to a show is starkly different depending on many different vectors of perspective and identity from which it is approached, and sometimes the evolving nature of how a work is perceived is an illustrative index of how the culture at large has changed, at times in part *because* of the show in question. While the themes of *Fiddler* and what it represents were relatively consistent from its initial run to its many subsequent versions, some shows have manifested change less in and of themselves and more so in relationship to the changes in the culture around them, irrespective of the iterative transformation process. One such work which I had the opportunity to participate in two different productions of and is especially rich in regard to these aforementioned qualities is *Jesus Christ Superstar.*

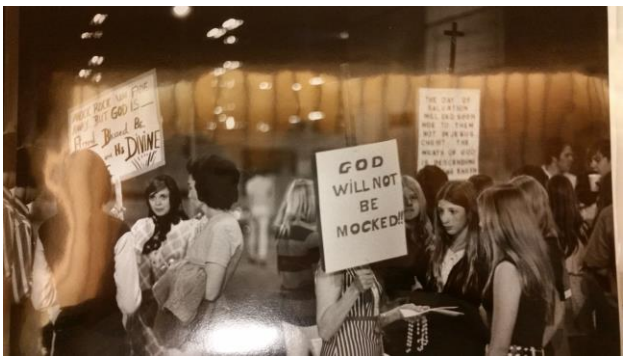
Superstar was, in contrast to *Fiddler*, a deliberate attempt in its time to make a more modern, contemporary musical, in contrast to the statelier and more *classic* feel sought by the makers of *Fiddler*. It was among the first pieces of musical theater conceived as a rock opera, i.e. incorporating rock and roll and soul music into the score (beyond early dabbling and/or gestures

of parody and pastiche ala *Bye Bye Birdie)* and its lyrics deliberately utilized the slang, attitude and sensibilities of the then contemporary counterculture, e.g. the song "What's the Buzz, tell me whatsa happenin'." Whether these elements were sincere or pandering is a matter of debate, but it also deviated from most prior musicals due to existing initially as a concept album sans spoken dialogue, and the eventual staged version is also entirely sung, qualities that differentiate it from many other more extensively discussed book musicals. Nevertheless, most contemporary stagings are produced by groups who produce musicals rather than opera companies, and it has been discussed in much of the literature as a marker of the history of musical theater more so than either rock or opera. [78] While *Fiddler* is a deeply serious examination of the challenges of preserving a traditional way of life, *Superstar* is a self-conscious modernization of an ancient, traditional story. It deliberately reworks and reinterprets one of the core narratives of western, Judeo-Christian culture, presenting Jesus and his disciples in the similitude of a late 60s hippie commune, and Jesus himself as a kind of rockstar whose true nature is left ambiguous. I participated in two different productions in the central Texas area: the Georgetown Palace Theatre's 2015 production and the following year at the San Pedro Playhouse (now Public Theatre of San Antonio). My experiences with this work illustrated yet more ways in which the *pull* of the show interacts with contingencies of religion, politics, generation and the specific dynamics of local scenes in the way it is performed and received.

In the first few years after its release as a concept album and subsequent touring show, *Superstar* was considered controversial for a variety of reasons. Christian groups objected to its sympathetic depiction of Judas Iscariot while considering the use of contemporary popular music to be inappropriate and irreverent. Jewish groups on the other hand believed that the libretto, like

[78] Histories of rock and roll like Andrew Covach's *What's That Sound* (2006) often discuss works like the Who's *Tommy* and other early concept albums rather than *Superstar* in identifying the origin of rock opera (p. 184).

many other renditions of the Passion story throughout the centuries, reinforced anti-Semitic stereotypes due to its villainous depiction of high priest Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin and the Jewish mob (in which respect it does not deviate greatly from the canonical gospels, though it does attribute Caiaphas and Annas with a somewhat more relatable motivation for their desire to get rid of Jesus: wanting to avoid provoking a violent suppression from the Romans). While it received generally favorable reviews in the press of the time, a lot of the coverage emphasized this controversy in a manner that reverberated for years later, such that in a sense the controversy became a component of the marketing and promotional work in subsequent versions, including the ones I participated in. The playbill for the San Pedro production, for example. includes the paragraph "audience response has historically been on polar ends of the spectrum: they love it or they hate it, rarely leaving any room for discussion or debate. Its debut was greeted with hurrahs by young fans for depicting the messiah in a human light, but religious groups considered it blasphemous and some even staged pickets outside the theater." Irrespective of later exaggeration or sensationalizing thereof, the controversy was certainly not invented as there are photos of the placards that incensed Christian groups brought with them to touring productions which included messages such as "God will not be mocked," "Mock Rock will fade but God is Eternal!" and quite ominously "Woe to them not in Jesus Christ, the wrath of God is descending upon the Earth."



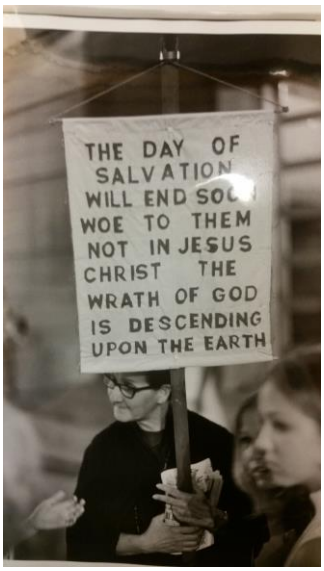


Figure 3: Set of Photos From David Douglas Duncan collection: Christian picketers outside the theater of Jesus Christ Superstar concert in Kansas City Missouri, 1971

Time magazine's feature on *Superstar* around that same time discussed the controversy in passing, though it gives more attention to the show's commercial and critical success and devotes much of its space to making an effort to explain its rise in popularity and its breadth of appeal.

In both productions I was involved in, there were a variety of different religious persuasions among the cast and crew. Ironically, I was one of the few unapologetic and unequivocal (in the sense of having no ostensible hesitation in identifying as such) atheists in either cast and yet it was I who played Jesus in both productions. However, I seldom encountered, either among Christians or non-Christians, any sentiment that the act of depicting the story of Jesus Christ through a rock opera was inherently disrespectful or tacky, let alone blasphemous. The San Pedro Playhouse production even invited church groups to have a question and answer session with the cast after a Sunday matinee production, with there being no representative voicing or otherwise exhibiting any offense at the material in and of itself (or with the particular rendering in our production for that matter). This exhibits how generation, religion,

and the stylistic evolutions of popular music in the culture at large all intersect to shape how a work is received and how it evolves in that culture over time, something which regional and community productions are particularly demonstrative of. After all, what better metric for a change in attitude towards a hippie rock opera about Jesus could there be than to see how it is put on and received in central Texas theaters for whom much of their core audience are older, semi-affluent, white southerners.

Superstar was not the first "rock opera" nor was it the first piece of musical theater to incorporate rock and roll, nor was it even the first example of a musical drawing inspiration from and attempting to speak to the counterculture of late 1960s (*Hair* was a fully realized and staged Off Broadway rock opera two years before the initial concept album of *Superstar* was recorded). But *Superstar,* along with *Hair, Tommy* and the slightly later *Rocky Horror Show,* were seen as radical departures from the mainstream of musical theater.[79] In 1969 rock music had only just begun to enter what many critics and historians consider its classic period and, for the most part, was still stigmatized as a less artistically respectable genre of music than Western classical music or jazz. This is reflected even in the aforementioned protesters' descriptions in their placards of *Superstar* as "mock rock" despite the emotional tone of the script and score being quite serious and tragic, and mostly lacking in overt comic relief (two of the most popular songs from the opera Judas' "Heaven on their minds" and Jesus' "Gethsemane (I only want to say)" are deeply earnest and intense pleas to the divine to avert a terrible, inevitable fate, delivered completely devoid of camp). Historians of popular music have often characterized the experimentation of the late 1960s in rock music as deriving from an impulse to attain the respectability that classical

[79] In Stempel's *Showtime* it notes that the omission of dialogue in particular, and the rock music elements were "challenging basic assumptions about the medium on several fronts at once" (Stempel: 610).

music and jazz had acquired.[80] While there had been many steps in the direction of developing rock and roll into an art music in the same sense and many of which had earned admiration from the high art worlds (e.g. Leonard Bernstein's praise for the Beatles, Miles Davis' emulation of Jimi Hendrix and Sly Stone, The Brill Building and Motown songwriters earning comparisons to the prime of Tin Pan Alley), rock music of the time was still not recognized as the proper milieu for something sacred.

From observing and speaking to audience members in both productions, there is much that has changed with regards to what *Superstar* means, how both its literal and performance *text* are transmitted and received, in part due to the example it set, the *pull* it exerted. That is not to say though that the potential for controversy has dissipated entirely. There were, for example, at least a few instances of audience members walking out, including once immediately following the moment during the song "strange thing mystifying" where Jesus angrily rebukes Judas in his disparagement of Mary Magdalene. Whether this was due to lack of familiarity with the content of the show or with various other specific decisions of that production was not entirely clear.[81]

On the other hand, there were several times when audience members in their sixties or older shared fond memories of listening to the original cast album, seeing the movie, or seeing touring or Broadway versions in the past. Most of them espoused a sense that it, in fact, helped them relate to Christ in a way that other liturgical fare that would have been more traditional in their youth did not. Many discussed and debated the relative merits of the performers who had portrayed the principal characters: Ian Gillan and Ted Neeley's portayals of Jesus (the latter a Texan who apparently was a personal acquaintance of one gentleman in a Georgetown

[80] Covach and Flory's *What's that Sound* describes this period as exemplifying "the aesthetic of ambition" (Covach: 252-306).
[81] In the Palace's staging Jesus was directed and blocked to aggressively shove Judas, forcing the disciples to hold him back from retaliating, there are reasons why some might have distaste for Jesus and Judas almost brawling.

audience), Yvonne Elliman as Mary Magdalene, Carl Anderson and Ben Vereen's portrayals Judas etc. One audience member even asked me "did you feel the spirit?" when I was on stage to which I could only honestly answer that there were certainly moments of intense performer's high and vicarious emotional catharsis but that I couldn't honestly say I attributed it to any divine presence (not in those words though). In another conversation with a Mormon bishop, somewhat too young to be considered a Baby Boomer but perhaps too old to be classified Generation X, the man remembers having intuited that he wasn't "supposed" to like *Superstar,* but that for him, it was one of his guilty pleasures. Thus, the kind of people who may have protested the show when it first came out now see little conflict between their faith and their enjoyment of it, even processing their interpretation of the show through their religious convictions, such as believing it was possible for someone portraying Jesus in what can most generously be regarded as an agnostic take on the passion story to be imbued with the holy spirit as they stood on stage. While some might attribute these changes to broader trends in American society towards secularization and social liberalization (which is also true of the United Kingdom, where the show's original writers hail from), it also ties to a recurrent, generational phenomenon. Shows that are initially regarded as radical, significant departures from their genre's canon become classicized when the people who were pulled to them when they were younger and the show was new, later attain some combination of the literal and cultural capital that age and experience usually bring and thus come to exert an influence on determining the canons of popular culture.

Oftentimes one can attribute the choices of which pieces theaters decide to produce in a given season to catering to the tastes of certain demographics, of which age/generation has been one of the most significant in nearly all of my experiences. Sometimes companies make specific modifications to the way a show is produced to deliberately pander to or subvert these

expectations, in either case deliberately grappling with the identity the show has acquired both as a document and a coterie of prior familiar performances, e.g. the literal and the Geertzian notions of text. With *Superstar*, numerous moments from the film and Broadway versions not specified in the book and score themselves have found their way into local productions. Norman Jewison, director of the film version, added what in modern parlance would be described as a *meta* or self-referential element by opening with the cast and crew disembarking onto the desert landscape from a tour bus and getting into costume during the overture, as a direct reminder that these are actors and musicians performing a passion play (which in the film is enacted in the middle of the dead sea in Israel). The San Pedro production included a similar set piece with the actors rifling through and handing out costume pieces to one another, while the Georgetown palace theater added several more conceptual layers to the same basic opening gesture.

In the Palace production, the entire cast rushes from the aisles to the stage during the overture to create the impression not only that they are actors but that they are arriving late, and grabbing the costume and/or prop trappings of the different characters on a first come, first serve basis. In the final moments of the overture, Cliff Butler who portrayed Judas, was directed to visibly reach towards the crown of thorns, the prop that symbolized the role of Jesus, but equally noticeably to stop and change his mind to instead grab the noose that represented the role of Judas. I, as Jesus, was to look with fear and trepidation at the realization that the crown of thorns was all that was left because I had arrived last. This not only added another layer to this *meta* conceit, in that it insinuated that we were actors *playing actors* playing the characters of the Christian gospels, but also, as director Mary Ellen Butler described it, was to imply that the performers were selecting which “pain” to experience on a given night, and that the choices

being made were decisively of the moment (and that if things had been different you might have seen a fundamentally different performance).

Not giving them what they'd expect, rekindling interest

Recreating elements not explicitly textually prescribed but that have become part of the packaged expectations is one demonstration of the pull of the show, as is the show serving at once as a marker of and a potential cause of shifting cultural attitudes, but deliberate attempts to alter or subvert audience expectations is also still a way in which productions engage with the work as a concept more than just as a guideline; as something that has been remembered, that has a history and means something. At times the popularity and the inheritances from prior versions can be viewed as a kind of albatross, or at least as a problem that needs to be addressed in some manner. Some teams can and have used deliberate defiance of expectations as a means of making an artistic statement, even if that statement is as simple as "we're doing something different." In 2016, the director of City Theatre's production of *Little Shop of Horrors* decided to adopt many iconoclastic changes in a deliberate attempt to distinguish their take on a property that represents not only themes of nostalgia but the curious and oft-remarked upon phenomenon of meta-nostalgia. Pearson Kashlak, writing for Austin Entertainment Weekly in describing this production framed the issue thus:

> How do you stage a production of a show in which the audience has certain expectations to the staging and depiction of the show while simultaneously differentiating yourself enough to create more than just "another variant"…some characters and tropes have become so hardwired into our cultural subconscious that to see them depicted in any other manner feels wrong. And yet, as is often the case, it's when we challenge these preconceived notions that our **interests are rekindled** (P. Kashlak, Austin Entertainment Weekly, 2016)

Little Shop of Horrors, like *Superstar, The Rocky Horror Show, Grease* or *Rent* is among the more popular rock musicals and like *Grease* before it, is a work of musical theater designed to evoke, celebrate and comment upon a prior decade that ultimately became popular enough to be revived several times and staged by many theaters over and over again. Adapted in 1982 from a darkly comic science fiction film from 1960, *Little Shop* fits well within the so-called nostalgia cycle that is often estimated to be between fifteen and thirty years. Other works of musical theater that represent this include not only the aforementioned *Grease* (written in 1971 but taking place in 1959), *Forever Plaid* (a review show written in 1989, compiling and reviewing music from the late '50s and early 60s) and other recent examples like *Heathers* (written and produced in 2014, based on a film from 1988). It has also recently (at the time of this writing) been produced for the third time in the central Texas area in 5 years as TexArts at Lakeway. Like *Superstar, Fiddler* and many others, it also had a successful film adaptation that informs subsequent productions and is frequently in rotation in revival screenings.

With all of these issues at play, City Theatre Austin's 2016 production, directed by Matthew Burnett (now Shead) decided to make some modifications with results that some perceived as refreshing and others as muddled and unnecessary,[82] but that regardless would have little to no meaning or purpose were the show not highly popular, imbricated with both nostalgia and meta nostalgia, and running the risk of seeming overfamiliar. In my discussion of the discourses of prestige and humility, I noted that City Theatre's employment of the former aligned with other smaller theaters and companies who assert that their objective is to 'challenge' their audiences, i.e. the artistic mode of prestige which in some cases implies not giving their audiences exactly what they are presumed to expect or want. In this case, Burnett decided to

[82] The aforementioned Austin Entertainment Weekly review described one radically reimagined scene as "uncomfortable to watch," among other criticisms.

make some alterations to the play that made what was already a darkly comic musical, derived from a tonally similar B-science fiction film, into something genuinely unsettling and not just darkly comedic, but darker period.

In the story as rendered in the original version, Seymour Krelborn, hapless floral assistant at Mushnik's floral shop, discovers a new species of plant that feeds off of human flesh and blood and which grows larger and more intelligent the more he feeds it. The plant impels him to compromise his morals more and more for the promise of the success and fame that being the plant's discoverer and promoter will yield. Burnett and lead actor Craig McKerley decided that they would include multiple implications that the story as the audience is familiar from prior versions is all a delusion in the mind of Seymour Krelbourn and that he, not the mutant plant, is the murderer, with the protagonist attributing his victims' deaths to the plant Audrey II in a series of hallucinations. I observed a conversation between McKerley and Burnett where the former commended the director for being willing to "not just give them the same old thing they expect."

The first of these came via having Seymour (McKerley) alone on stage during the opening narration in which an unseen announcer reminiscent of many lurid voiceovers from science fiction films describes how "in an early year of a decade not too far from our own, the human race suddenly encountered a deadly threat to its very existence, and this terrifying enemy surfaced as such enemies often do, in the seemingly most innocent and unlikely of places." The narration itself frames the retrophilic character of the work—both taking place in and evoking the film and musical styles of a 'decade not too far from our own'—while the modified staging informs the current audience that this version of *Little Shop* will differ from most others prior. McKerley, alone on stage reading a magazine and then lowering it to aim a disconcerting leer at the audience (instead of having any incarnation of the Audrey II plant visible) indicates either

that the narration is describing Seymour and not the plant or that the events of the play are occurring in Seymour's imagination, perhaps catalyzed by pulp science fiction reading materials. Another such deviation from the script as typically staged was previously discussed in reference to the interaction between practical, technical heuristics and the discourses of *prestige* and *humility*: Seymour stabbing and pushing Mr. Mushnik into Audrey II rather than reluctantly and timidly luring Mr. Mushnik into its active clutches was used as a means of overcoming the cramped stage and unwieldiness of the largest puppet.

Perhaps the most intentionally disturbing modification in this production occurred in what is typically regarded as the most emotionally and musically poignant moments of the show. Towards the end of the second act, human female lead Audrey is lured by her carnivorous plant namesake, attacked and nearly devoured. Seymour narrowly pulls Audrey out of Audrey II's mouth but she is left mortally wounded. While she lies dying in Seymour's arms, Audrey instructs Seymour to feed her dead body to the plant so that she will 'become part of the plant' and that as the plant's caretaker she and Seymour can still be together. This leads into the tragic reprise of Audrey's feature song "Somewhere that's green," which had earlier conveyed her naïve desire to escape the urban squalor of 'Skid Row' into an idealized, clean, suburbia; the title now taking on a new, ironic meaning. In City Theatre's rendition though, Seymour chokes Audrey to death with her scarf at the end of the song, again with dual implications that Seymour is either euthanizing her to spare her from bleeding to death slowly from her injuries or that Seymour is the sole culpable party for her death and Audrey II is just a psychotic projection in his head.

Irrespective of the musical or dramatic efficacy of these kinds of changes, they reflect a deliberate engagement with *Little Shop Of Horrors* not just as a template to be treated as a

suggestive basis for something performed synchronically, night to night and in the moment, but as a package of cultural meaning, inheritance and expectations. Part of the rationale behind the specific change of vilifying Seymour reflects a change in the way American culture in particular relates to many of the tastes, the tropes of science fiction and the cultural anxieties that were much more prominent in the zeitgeist of the Cold War, which were arguably at their most intense in the years that both the original film and the original stage musical were produced: the 1960s (close to the time of the Cuban missile crisis) and 1980s (near in time to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan). Both versions have elements of camp and dark comedy, but the monstrous plant in both versions connects to the sensibilities of the past that generated from real uncertainties and fears as science fiction so often does.

The original 1960 film explains that Audrey Jr. was a previously unseen mutant or hybrid of existing plants while the musical explained that it was an extraterrestrial organism that came to earth during a total eclipse with the aim of global conquest. While fears about mutation and genetic engineering have remained relevant in more recent years, stories about alien invasions and horrific radiation-borne mutations carried more plausibility during the early years of the space race and the atomic age. The 1950s and 60s monster movies were replete with examples of creatures created by atomic radiation or other perceived overreaches of scientific experimentation, which loomed much more prominently in the minds of the average consumer during these years, even if the specific rendering of these themes in science fiction may not have always registered as something that merited serious consideration. And while the outer space component was added to the stage musical in the 1980s, the intervening years have seen both the theories about and the technological advances of space exploration stall and stagnate and, thus, have made the possibility of ever encountering extraterrestrial life seem more remote. In short, a

monster like Audrey II/Audrey Jr. was not *just* an artifact of camp, escapism and black comedy, but something that retained a kernel of believability however minute that has diminished in the years since. In contrast, the decades since *Little Shop's* debut have accompanied the rise in popularity of psychological horror films and television that centralize themes of questioning the relationship between perception and reality, and often employ the shocking or contrived twist that the apparently supernatural or science fiction is merely a delusion, nightmare, or fantasy of one or more of the main characters.[83]

Other changes that Burnett and music director Tomas Azar implemented illustrate the extent to which the *pull* of the show can frustrate or obstruct attempts to deviate too far from the written prescription. On top of the changes to Seymour's character, City Theatre toyed with the idea of replacing the trio of doo-wop girls who serve as the play's narrators and ensemble chorus with doo-wop boys instead. While this alteration does not have the same valences that it might in other cases of gender or racially flipped/blind casting, it does serve as evidence of the ways musical theater's gendered associations are in a state of flux. It has been a persistent observation among my colleagues that musicals remain more popular among women than men. Many colleagues have commented that that has been changing in recent years in that more men are participating and that it is less dominated by gay men than it might have been in the past. However, my own observations and those of directors and musicians I have worked with still attest that women do still outnumber men in auditions most of the time, sometimes significantly. Ultimately, Burnett et al. made the choice to include a trio of male singers as a supplement to the traditional doo-wop girl trio in some key moments rather than disappoint the women who came

[83] Some Examples from films include *Secret Window* (2004), *Identity* (2003), *Hide and Seek* (2005), *Perfect Stranger* (2007). Though this trend is also somewhat dated now it is still a thematic update in comparison to the story of the musical and the original 1960 film.

to audition by eliminating the trio of Ronette, Chiffon, and Crystal altogether,[84] or conversely have the various male ensemble characters all played by women.

Do We Just Not Do the Show? Issues of Representation

In many shows race, gender and sexuality is either explicitly part of the narrative or an obvious component of the received expectations and precedent entangled with the work. Even when it is not, the dynamics of representation in and through casting and framing exhibits another dimension to the pull of the show. Several landmark works in musical theater deal with how American culture has coped with racial, cultural or other varieties of "outsiders" —such as *Showboat, Oklahoma, South Pacific, West Side Story, Assassins* etc.[85]—or in one way or other pertain to how American society treats and reconciles with those who are deemed outside the mainstream. Many scholars have written about this but, as in other cases, the ways issues of representation are explored in regional and community contexts are less visible compared to Broadway and Hollywood. If we accept Warren Hoffman's characterization that "musical theater is the history of white identity in the United States" it is especially important to consider how race and gender are treated not just in the most nationally prominent renderings. Sometimes the question for the theater or group who seeks to perform a work whose diegetic view on race, gender, sexuality or any other representational focus is rooted in the historical context in which it was originally created, is if and how to modify it appropriately. Adam Roberts and others have opined that pure authenticity or *Werktreue* in musical theater is at the very least elusive (in an interview he once flat out commented that it "does not exist"), and that what matters is not *if* a

[84] The Doo wop boys, though never named, were nicknamed Ronnie, Chris and Stephon.
[85] Knapp's *The American Musical And the Formation of National Identity* (2004) extensively discusses this theme and most of these specific works in his sixth, seventh and eighth chapters (pp. 119-215).

work is changed, but the specific form those modifications take. While nationality and ethnicity sometimes factor into these decisions, casting characters with performers who are not of the precise, specific national origin or ethnic group of a role rarely attracts much attention or controversy; casting someone who is not say Irish or Italian in a role that is written in that way is neither considered a daring choice or a problematic one, at least in the local scene, especially when dealing with characters that are coded as white/Caucasian. The experience with *Fiddler on the Roof* occupies somewhat of a grey area, though again at the time it did not court much controversial reaction. Casting male roles with female actors or, vice versa, having actors of color play white characters (or vice versa) tends to garner attention, whether positive or negative.

One of my colleagues who has been both a castmate and a director to me, Clifford Butler, remarked that when a certain show has characters whose race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or any other important facet of their identity are less common, or even unavailable, from the available auditioners, the producers may have tough questions to ask themselves. Perhaps they may have to ask of themselves "Do we just not do the show?" a question which my conversations with Butler and others have implied completely divergent answers to at different times. In other cases, deliberately tinkering with the casting of roles that are not associated with any underrepresented group can be a means of helping to pull a very familiar show towards a more distinctive local incarnation. Butler, in all my interactions with him as castmate, director and friend, is a man who is very sensitive to these issues of representation. For him, in addressing the complications that can arise with how these issues factor into production choices, we discussed cases where the decision to even produce certain shows in the first place may be perceived as questionable or highly problematic, given the demographics of an area and the constituency of their talent pool. Among the popular shows that have experienced the

aforementioned cycling through different theaters (albeit to a lesser extent than many of those listed earlier), *Smokey Joe's Café* is a show that demonstrates not only some of the specifically racial and ethnic components to the identity of a show, but also the ways these are addressed, for better or worse, in different localized contexts.

Smokey Joe's, in contrast to some of the other works discussed here, is neither a book musical nor a quasi-opera, but a review show. There are some creators and fans who consider review shows and jukebox musicals (a related though slightly different phenomenon) to be of much less artistic merit than more story driven, integrated book musicals or quasi-operas like *Superstar*, which are sung throughout but still are narratively driven. Glenna Bowman is one such creator who, in discussing the increased popularity of these shows e.g. *Jersey Boys, Million Dollar Quartet, Mama Mia, Beautiful etc.*, and whether they represented a reversion to the ways musical theater was practiced in much earlier times, remarked that "I like the book musicals. I don't want it to go back to the way it used to be decades ago." *Smokey Joe's* exists primarily as a showcase for the song catalog of R&B songwriters Leiber and Stoller, who, although they were white, Jewish men, wrote in a style rooted in black American culture and vernacular language, and in their early career mostly for black performers including Big Mama Thornton, The Drifters, and the Coasters. However, Leiber and Stoller also wrote songs for white artists like Elvis Presley, and their significance to the history of popular music is often framed via the narrative of rock and roll as a synthesis of African American and rural white American folk and popular musics (i.e. characterizing Rock and Roll as a symbol of America's racial and ethnic collaboration and melting pot). Traditionally, the cast includes a quartet of black male performers meant to represent groups like The Drifters, and at least one black female performer as a thinly veiled stand in for singers like Big Mama Thornton.

Two of the theaters that have recently staged *Smokey Joe's*, The Georgetown Palace Theater in the summer of 2016 and TexArts at Lakeway in the fall of 2018, were both not only in predominantly white and affluent areas, but also have relatively few people of color among their usual talent pool, and each found different solutions to this challenge. In speculating about this, one acquaintance jokingly remarked that he didn't think one of the two theaters would be able to find enough participants to cast the aforementioned roles in the traditional way: "They're not going to find enough [black performers] to do that the right way." Thus, while it falls outside what are often the more heavily analyzed and acclaimed works in the musical theater tradition, *Smokey Joe's* and other shows like it exemplify another important dimension of the *pull* of the show. Even works where storytelling and characterization takes a backseat to a song catalog can exert a tremendous influence on people's minds.

In the case of TexArts' production, the female roles were evenly split between black and white actresses: Kia Malone and Jessica O'Brien among the former and Lauren DeFillipo and Christina Stroup the latter. The male quartet included three black actors: Edward L. Burkley IV, Quincey Kuykendall and Roderick Sanford, with the fourth member played by Hispanic actor Paul Sanchez. Thus, TexArts, at the time one of the few theaters in the greater Austin area with any status with AEA (participating in their shows used to earn EMC candidacy points), was able to cast *Smokey Joe's* in a mostly traditional manner. Having a hispanic actor play what is otherwise typically an African-American role did not garner any controversy, though it does ironically come close to proving the aforementioned commenter's prediction to have been accurate. The review of this production by frequent Broadway World and Ctxlivetheatre.com contributor Lacey Gonzales stated that: "Commendation must also be given to the diversity in this production. Showcasing artists of color and those of different ages, genders and abilities

should always be a priority to continue elevating Austin and the surrounding areas' theatre community." [86]This simple statement reflects the fact that in these contexts diversity in casting is still perceived as novel or as a progressive gesture even when the show by its nature (if one approaches it *faithtfully/*authentically at any rate) is already supposed to represent people of color.

The Georgetown Palace Theatre's production was less 'diverse' than Lakeway's, having the male quartet comprised of white actors Kirk Kelso, Boyce Templin, and Mexican-American actors Chris Barfield and Pablo Sanchez (white actor Buddy Novak played the 'token' white Elvis surrogate). The female singers included white actresses Emily Perzan, Kelsey Woodrige and Ann Richards, and Hispanic actress Stefanie Rene Salyers (other associates of the Palace commented anonymously that there were black performers who were offered roles but who ultimately declined). In addressing how this decision was perceived and how it may have affected the show, even as complex as the Leiber and Stoller songbook's relationship to black identity and culture is, Kelso commented that:

> It was in Williamson county and I can count the number of African Americans who came to see the show on one hand. The concept of that show is interesting in the first place because it's loosely a trip down memory lane for these people but they're not all the same age. They're traditionally cast, if you stick to the 'rulebook' as four African-American men, one Anglo man or he could be Hispanic and then the women are two and two [black and white] so you're probably talking about a lower class, lower income neighborhood that they are all reminiscing about . . . so it's like a collective remembering, but a lot of the numbers for the men particularly are written for the groups like Coasters, the Drifters, all those four man quartet groups [87] and luckily I was able to get to do that show, because I will probably never get to be able to do it again because the perception would be "oh

[86] https://www.broadwayworld.com/austin/article/BWW-Review-SMOKEY-JOES-CAFE-is-Energetic-Must-See-Fun-at-TexArts-20180222.

[87] The Drifters were a quartet while the Coasters were technically a quintet with one member being both guitarist and occasional vocalist.

> you're taking an African American role away and giving it to a white person" (K. Kelso, personal interview, June 6, 2019).

These comments underscore the at times fraught tension between the pull towards representing the perceived spirit of the show, representing the roles as written and representing the theater and its surrounding (without taking recourse to proverbial ringers). He also helps illustrate the extent to which a show that might be perceived as a "token minority" show in a season can also have important thematic dimensions that can be engaged with separate from the demographically representational ones. In this case the theme of nostalgia is a vector to contemplate the notion of shared experience in and, through music, something often emphasized in the press for the show. The score bookends with the song "Neighborhood," which implicitly situates all the performers either as coming from the same physical or at least conceptual space. Given that Leiber and Stoller grew up in Harlem in the 1930s and 40s, this is most likely meant to evoke a poorer neighborhood wherein the intersections of class and space create a degree of shared experience for people of different ethnic backgrounds. Per Butler's question "do we just not do the show?," the answer in this case seems to be that the celebration of the music itself and what and who it represents implicitly had enough of an attraction that it was worth eliciting perceptions of representational impropriety. Putting on a show that celebrates Rhythm and Blues, a genre of music associated with black performers and black culture, and that is a product of an era when collaboration of white and black musical traditions was at a peak[88] justified whatever drawbacks the local demographics may have created in casting the show in the traditional, and many would

[88] Much of the segregation of terminology e.g. Rock and Roll connoting white and Rhythm and Blues connoting black occurred after the first early wave of performers and intensified under the corporatization of the music industry and FM radio. Karl Miller's work Segregating Sound (2010) also argues that, ironically, black and white musical culture were less segregated under Jim Crow.

argue proper, way. None of which is to argue against it being problematic, only that it should not be analyzed in isolation or without respect to converse instances of non-traditional casting to buttress underrepresented groups in roles that were originally white, male, cisgendered, heteronormative etc.

To that end it is a noteworthy coincidence that these same two theaters had a reversed relationship with regard to a different show that they also both produced in close temporal proximity to one another. In the fall of 2017 the Georgetown Palace Theatre staged *Annie* while TexArts staged the same show in the summer of 2019. To say that *Annie* is not usually considered a "diverse" show might be something of an understatement. Prior to some of the most recent renditions, one of which was famously a completely racially inverted adaptation of the same story with an entirely new set of songs, *Annie* is a show inextricable from the image popularized in its comic strip and radio show of a white, redheaded orphan as a symbol of Americana. Yet in the Palace's version, the titular lead role was shared by two young, mixed-race actresses, Camryn Mwalwanda, and McKenna Villarreal, whereas TexArt's recent version, while also double-casting Annie and many of the child roles, used white actresses Danielle Guilbot and Luciana Marinari in both casts. While the actresses in the Palace version are relatively lighter-skinned, they were, nevertheless, both a departure from most Broadway versions prior to the 2000s and from the most popular 1980s film adaptation.

The story and score of *Annie* also foreground themes of class, space and music as a mechanism to share feelings, perspectives and experiences: culminating in the titular orphan inspiring FDR's passage of the New Deal by singing "Tomorrow" in front of his cabinet and thus communicating that even those in the most oppressed of circumstances can be united (via song) in a feeling of hope of potential for things to get better. Whereas the "neighborhood" of Smokey

Joe's might symbolize the commonalities between the white and black working classes, *Annie*, in most of its iterations uses an underclass white girl from a similar New York neighborhood as a stand in for all of the underprivileged people of America during the Great Depression, which glosses over the disproportionate poverty experienced by not only black, Latin and Asian Americans but also many non-Anglo white minorities in the decade of its setting as well. That little orphan Annie is a near century-old symbol of innocence, perseverance, and optimism of the American working class makes it all the more significant for updated versions to allow her to represent more aspects of America than she had in the past. In my estimation each actress emphasized different aspects of Annie's character: Mwalwanda and Guilbot both admirably conveyed her precocity, Villarreal emphasized her street-hardened toughness and Marinari her innocence and optimism. In both Tex-Arts' and the Georgetown Palace's versions, having Annie appear with curly red hair and make her entrance in the penultimate musical duet with Daddy Warbucks with a red and white polka-dotted dress were considered obligatory; that she had red, curly hair and the iconic dress was deemed more essential to the character than her race, yet another direction that the pull of the work exerts itself.

In another example of non-traditional casting, in the fall of 2016 the Georgetown Palace theater produced *1776*, in which nearly all the roles as written are white men, and which concerns the words and deeds of arguably the most celebrated and mythologized group of white men in American history: the framers of the Constitution. Due to the aforementioned higher ratio of women to men who are observed to be drawn to musical theater, staging a show like 1776, which has dozens of male roles and only two parts for women, is a challenge if one is endeavoring to cast the show traditionally. On top of that, the subject of the show is close in proximity to the historical era of the most popular Broadway production of recent years, Lin

Manuel-Miranda's *Hamilton*, which has taken a deliberate racially diverse reimagining of history in its approach to casting as one of its more salient features, something which has been lauded as a reimagining of the nation's past to accord more closely with the demographics and updated power dynamics of contemporary America, while many other recent revivals of popular musicals have "flipped" the gender of some or all of the principal roles a la the recently scheduled Broadway revival of Sondheim's *Company* with a female lead as Bobby[89], or a recent concert revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 2017 with actresses in the roles of Jesus and Judas[90]. Ultimately the director, Mr. Butler in this case, decided to cast the show with more than half of the male characters played by female actors and a handful of roles of white characters played by actors of color.

Whether or not this decision was arrived at for purely pragmatic concerns (there not being enough men who came out to audition) or to make a progressive, political statement in support of gender and race fluid approaches to casting is actually a false dilemma, and both likely were contributing factors, as was the popularity of a recently created musical on a related subject matter that took a similar approach to its depiction of the foundational era of the United States. Cliff commented to me, though, that there were several roles he was not willing to "flip": he was not interested in casting the two female characters, Abigail Adams and Martha Jefferson with male actors nor was he willing to cast Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin with women. Cliff's reasoning pertained to what he believed his audience, demographically somewhat older and conservative in the Georgetown area, would be willing to accept, though the fact that he considered the overall approach to be minimally controversial is a testament to changes in social

[89] https://www.playbill.com/article/stephen-sondheim-on-a-female-lead-in-company-what-is-there-to-lose.
[90] https://www.yourtango.com/2020334447/jesus-christ-superstar-reimagined-all-women-cast.

attitudes since *1776* was originally produced. While John Adams was portrayed by an actress, and thus was positioned as the romantic counterpart to another woman, having either of the delegates' wives portrayed by a cisgendered man in drag would have been too "distracting," or would clash with the expectations of old-fashioned feminine gentility that these characters are expected to convey.[91]

As to why Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson "had to be played by men," there are a variety of potential explanations one can infer from Butler's words. As attested, the demographics of the Palace's season ticket holders leans older and more conservative. On one level there is a simple unwillingness to challenge the assumed core audience of the theater too much, even as they did endeavor to push against the boundaries of what they'd expect and accept. As discussed previously, much of the Palace's choices for their mainstage are 'classic' musicals, or at the very least well-known shows with established fanbases. While some amount of toying and manipulation of gender roles and expectations pervades much of classic musical theater, and there are many canonical characters in popular musicals such as Edna Turnblatt in Hairspray or Mary Sunshine in Chicago who have been more often than not portrayed by men in drag, rarely are such parts leading roles apart from works in which exploring non-normative gender and sexuality is a main thematic thrust of the show's story such as the stage adaptations of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch, Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (both recently staged at the Zach Topfer stage in the last 3 years) or other works that centralize LGBTQ experience like *Fun Home* (which was recently produced by the Ground Floor Theatre, discussed previously).

[91] There are a few transgender and non-binary individuals who have been involved in Palace productions in capacities such as stage crew but virtually none among the frequent talent pool, in my field experiences.

Butler's sense that casting Thomas Jefferson with a female actor or Martha with a male actor was "going too far" indicates that, by the norms of many musicals of decades past, such a choice would seem to be made for the sake of comedic novelty rather than a sincere effort to sensitively represent queer characters and relationships. In regard to the treatment of Benjamin Franklin, leading women in musical theater are often expected to be youthful, conventionally attractive and slim, all three of which characteristics Franklin was diametrically the opposite. Furthermore, there is a tendency in modern American culture to treat women perceived as overweight and unattractive with revulsion or pity that is less often directed towards men. A slim and/or conventionally attractive woman wearing a fat suit may convey too much irony for an audience who are already undergoing an experience that challenges their expectations, to be able to process while still taking the character with the (partial) reverence that Benjamin Franklin is expected to be received. In either case we can see the *pull* of the work and the meanings it contains *pulling back* against even a fairly radical reworking of it.

Some local performers have not only voiced offense at incidents of perceived representational insensitivity in certain local productions but have also greeted certain well-intentioned attempts at promoting diversity with skepticism. While most theaters and organizations pay at least some lip service to the projects of social justice and diversity, not every attempt has been welcomed or lauded, though conversely not every perceived mistake has necessarily earned intense condemnation either. Drama teacher and performer Kera Wright (who is black herself) commented to me that:

> That's something that's been talked about in the circles that I run in is that the attempts at being diverse or including a diverse cast is a gimmick and not authentic and it shows in the performance because you're just throwing a woman in a man's role to say "oh wow

> look at me I'm a feminist" or switching up the "oh yes let's have a black person act in a Shakespeare play how outrageous."
> I wanna know what was the reasoning behind it and how did they do it and what else did they change to support that choice? There's been some interesting discussions about Hamilton itself and how progressive is it really? There have been some pretty scathing reviews saying that's it's just whitewashing colonialism (K. Wright, personal interview, August 30, 2019).

These words reflect that for many in the local performing arts scene addressing the continuing challenges of representing the underrepresented is not as simple as the occasional tinkering or experiment with flipped, color-blind or otherwise modified casting: that it has the potential to reduce the issue of representation to tokenism and novelty, or as Wright phrased it a "gimmick." She continues to address how this applies specifically to the realm of musicals and examples like some of the ones described above:

> I feel like there aren't that many musicals that have actors of color as the predominant focus especially Latinx actors. There's *In the Heights, West Side Story*, maybe *Evita* but not really and the Palace has attempted to do all of them with majority white actors and it is just a travesty because there are so many musicals that would be perfect for the talent and the demographic that they have and they chose to do those…
> I think the other component of that is who is the audience that is going to Georgetown Palace shows. There are some people from Austin but the majority of them are from Georgetown and having been there for more than a year, you're just reinforcing stereotypes and not doing anything to help anyone out is just not a good look (K. Wright, personal interview, August 30, 2019).

What these examples all demonstrate is that musical theater cannot be understood completely from an auteur or work-centric or from a purely praxis-centric approach. Describing the history of musicals, or any genre, just as a series of important shows produced by important creative authors has its self-evident problems of neglecting performance, audience reception and the technical and craft labor it takes to produce a musical. Bruce Kirle's notion of musicals as works in progress, or Millie Taylor's application of the Geertzian hermeneutic approach to view

musicals as a complex of "performance text" have been useful frameworks to add to the analysis of the genre. But looking only at the particularity of a performance, or thinking about the received work only as something incomplete to be continually modified and reinvented has the potential to lose sight of the levels of continuity and persistence that exist alongside revision and transformation, as well as the meaning and significance that the received work retains for those that perform, view and listen to it (even if our understanding of the work inevitably must broaden beyond the published document/s). To those of us who watch, listen and perform in musicals, *the show* as an abstraction certainly matters, has meaning and indeed exerts a pull on people before, during and after each iteration it is given. This helps us understand the drive towards not just making new and novel versions of established, well-known works but also how and why locals work to create original shows as well.

Chapter 5: Sounding like Texas

As some of the experiences discussed in prior chapters have touched on, I have had a surprising number of occasions during my fieldwork where I heard some variation of the instruction or the sentiment that it was best if we "don't sound like you're from Texas." Indeed, attempting to understand and analyze the culture of musical theater in central Texas exhibits an intriguing relationship between musical theater and its surroundings, whether it be the relationship to Texas culture, Austin culture or the culture of musical theater on the national level. There have been many influential ethnographies of musical subcultures that are tightly intertwined with a particular area's identity, its economy and the political and social prerogatives behind how that place-be it a city, a state, a country or even just a neighborhood-present themselves. David Grazian's examination of the Chicago Blues scene *Blue Chicago* shows how deeply embedded the Blues is in the city's self-conception, tourism industry and racial and class politics, which is appropriate given the extent that Chicago is *kn*own for its blues scene. Travis Jackson's *Blowin the Blues Away* is a similar work with a focus on jazz clubs in New York. Numerous articles and books have been written about the jazz, second line, zydeco and R&B scenes which are all part of New Orleans' population's self-conception and presentation of its culture.

Aaron Fox's *Real Country* (2004) and Kim Kattari's dissertation work *Psychobilly: Imagining and Reimagining a Culture of Survival* focused on musical subcultures that are proverbially right in the same backyard as this one, with a focus on country music in Lockhart Texas in Fox's case and psychobilly bands and fans in Austin in Kattari's. Most of these studies have tended to focus on genres, styles or subcultures which are in some sense recognizable to outsiders as part of that area's culture or its public image. Studying musical theater in Texas is

fundamentally different not only because Austin, San Antonio and their surrounding satellite towns are not areas closely associated with musical theater specifically, but that, as my friend and contributor Sarah Danko remarked most succinctly about Austin in particular, they're "not really known for theater."

Austin, Texas has branded itself for many years as the "the live music capital of the world," and has also long promoted a corollary slogan "Keep Austin Weird" that further buttresses the connection of Austin's culture to ideas compatible with the former like outdoor music festivals, hippie/countercultural sensibilities, and a cluster of thoughts and images at times starkly different from many of the stereotypes associated with Texas as a state. Exactly how and by whom these conceptions are formed is beyond the scope of this research, but they contribute to a perception shared by many of my interlocutors that Austin is more of a city for musicians and bands than it is for theater of any kind, let alone musicals, despite festivals like Austin City Limits and South By Southwest giving a great deal of national attention to live music in a general sense. San Antonio is slightly different in that it does not have the same forces behind constructing a collective notion of itself as a "hip" city or a city defined by its live music. Dallas and Houston, in no small part due to their much higher populations, have a greater abundance of theaters, including equity and semi-professional theaters. But none of these cities has developed an image as a "theater town" to the same degree as New York, Chicago or even Pittsburgh (at least according to some).

This phenomenon is, in part, confirmed by the previously alluded fact that many of my friends and acquaintances who have resolved to find any and all legitimately career advancing opportunities as performers, writers and directors, have decided to leave for various other places. Emily Perzan, a co-star of mine in productions at City Theatre, Zilker Hillside and the

Georgetown Palace theatre decided to pursue non-equity touring as a step for greater professional development (although most recently she has moved back to Austin). Several others, including some of my interview subjects thus far like Kristin DeGroot, have decided to, as they have variously phrased it "bite the bullet," "go for broke," or "make the big push" and move to New York. Others have gone to San Diego, Chicago, Denver or any number of other cities and for the most part none of them have voiced any regret for those choices. This phenomenon can be attributed to what in contexts outside of theater and the performing arts is usually described as brain drain, or perhaps talent drain, an effect often observed in circumstances where the divisions between supposed capitals and peripheries intensify over time because the people who are distinctly able and/or decisively ambitious tend to leave the *periphery* to seek the *center.* On the other hand, it also correlates with the high number of people whom I have met (though by no means a majority), who were not from Texas originally anyway and thus may not have a sense of loyalty to the local scene. I myself am originally from Salt Lake City and have met people from Maryland, Massachusetts, Los Angeles (a much larger city but perceived as more of a "Mecca" for television and film) and many other places as often as I have met people who were born and raised in Texas.

Given all of this, it might seem strange to choose to study musical theater in this place. But simply because these places are not identified as strongly or *known* to outsiders for theater, or because musical theater has not been promoted to the same degree that other art forms have been here, it does not mean that there aren't rich and varied engagements with what it means to write, produce and perform musicals in central Texas- it does not mean that the Texas and local quality of theater is neglected or forgotten even if certain economic and political forces in Texas might seem at times to neglect and forget musical theater. Through my field experiences I have

observed and participated in a variety of manifestations of this: some companies seek to represent particular communities within their city in their performance of musicals, such as Lisa Scheps describing her production of *Fun Home* for the Ground Floor Theatre becoming a kind of communal solidarity event for the LGBTQ community in Austin. Others have written original works deliberately about Texan history or oriented towards local culture, and others have crafted original musicals derived from their more idiosyncratic, individual perspectives simply as an alternative to canonical and by extension overfamiliar works/shows like those discussed in the previous chapter. And as the array of manifestations of the push and pull of the show demonstrate, many other performers, directors and writers are compelled to hone their craft with respect to what are, or what they perceive to be, the local tastes and local cultural milieu, wherever that leads.

"It Goes Better In a Song": Texas Comedies

One company that I have collaborated with that has come to specialize in original works with a focus on stories from Texas history is Texas Comedies. The name itself reflects efforts by its founder, John Cecil, to emphasize local identification, having shifted towards this name for his production company (an LLC as opposed to many of the other local theaters which are 501c3's) from the former designation of Crank Collective, which has a more general association with comedy and to a lesser extent with the *weirdness* of Austin (myself and others upon hearing their former name in conversation assumed that they were an improv group similar to those associated with some of Austin's venues such as the Hideout Theatre, Coldtown Theatre and the Institution). Even prior to settling on this name[92] Texas Comedies had come to specialize in

[92] For the most part, as there is some indication from recent prints of their scripts that they have not abandoned their former appellation for all uses altogether.

pieces of musical theater that have explored particularly odd episodes from Texas history. Their website currently has adopted the slogan "musicals about your town," as the plots often are loosely based on events in various small Texas towns. Most of these shows are lighter fare in many respects compared to some of the more ambitious productions and pieces I have both observed and contributed to, most ranging from about an hour to eighty minutes, with songs whose melodies and lyrics are relatively unchallenging from a technical standpoint to performers who have not had extensive musical training (although they are not lacking in moments that showcase some of the more technically accomplished singers who have participated from time to time). John Cecil writes the scripts and thus far nearly all of the songs, often using a vocabulary of three- to four-chord progressions that most guitarists versed in blues, country, and rock stylings would be able to learn fairly easily.

Cecil and Texas Comedies/Crank Collective's Texas History themed series includes titles such as *Prohibition, Redscare, The True Story of Bonnie and Clyde, Alamo Aftermath, Murders and Moontowers* and *The Feud.* Each of these is a satirical take on a story from the state's history with infusions of absurdity, slapstick, deliberate anachronism and other forms of comedic modification. Yet on balance these works only take minor liberties with events as described in the historical sources they draw from. Often, a specific show is constructed in such a way as to highlight the inherent absurdity of the events depicted rather than rely on pronounced exaggeration to achieve the same effect. Cecil has a core group of recurrent collaborators including Megan Ortiz, who has been the presumed if sometimes unofficial choreographer of most of the Texas history shows as well as playing a variety of both principal and ensemble parts in them. Other regulars include performers who are well embedded in the social circles of community theatre in the area such as Phil Rodriguez, Emily Villarreal, Heath Alyn, Kristin

DeGroot and myself. Cecil also has a core group of local musicians he resorts to when putting together the accompanying bands. As well as performing in Austin, Texas Comedies take their productions on the road to small towns throughout Texas including Sherman, Galveston, Columbus, Kyle, Seguin, Kileen and others.

In some respects, Texas Comedies' modus operandi harkens back to the early history of musical theater prior to the advent of the *integrated* musicals of the 1920s and 30s in that many of the songs written for the shows can be interchanged. Although most of the music is specific to the characters and plots of the different shows, there are many songs that function as modular or swappable pieces between them. Sometimes this is to accommodate the performers, who might be available during a particular run of performances, or in response to a perceived difference between the audience tastes in different towns on tours. In some cases there is a noticeable difference between musical pieces that were written with a specific plot in mind, songs that have a more general emphasis on a particular mood or feeling or ones that have a more oblique connection to the narrative and characters of a given show. Some of these songs, though structurally interchangeable, actually serve a multi-faceted function of conveying the broader intertextual philosophy of history and the satirical ethos of the group. The song "Most of it is true," which has alternately been placed into multiple titles in their repertory including *Alamo Aftermath*, *Prohibition* and others (not as a recurrent element between shows but as one of several songs whose position in the lists of numbers can be interchanged) exemplifies this.

The melody is a soft, wistful ballad with lyrics that establish for the audience that while these works may have an educational function and an appeal to aficionados of local history, that there is inevitably some dramatic license. Most of it is true in the sense that history itself is always fictive in nature, if on no other account than telling history is to impose a narrative to

frame and describe events. The playful, wryly amusing lyrics juxtaposed against the sentimental feeling of the melody insinuates a similar juxtaposition of the purposes of presenting underrecognized chapters of Texas history while also *merely* entertaining and getting laughs, and perhaps devising a clever satirical comment about the events concerned along the way.

HEY, DON'T SAY I LIE;
LYING TO YOU I COULD NEVER DO.
WHAT I'M GOING TO SHARE NOW, I SWEAR,
MOST OF IT IS TRUE.
NOW, LET ME SING MY SONG;
I'LL OUTLINE ALL THE MAIN POINTS
JUST FOR YOU.
I'LL TELL ALL NOW, AND I VOW
MOST OF IT IS TRUE.
MEMORY'S AN OLD FRIEND YOU RELY ON.
A CLOSET FULL OF COSTUMES
THAT YOU TRY ON.
SO CHOOSE YOUR FACTS, AND DON'T REMIND
YOURSELF OF THINGS YOU LEFT BEHIND.
PLEASE, WON'T YOU BELIEVE?
IF YOU WILL, TOGETHER, WE'LL GET THROUGH.
DO NOT SQUIRM, CAUSE I AFFIRM
MOST OF IT IS TRUE.
IT'S TRUE, IT'S TRUE,
IT'S TRUE, IT'S TRUE,
BEFORE YOU SNORT AND LAUGH,
I TELL YOU MORE THAN HALF...
WELL, ALMOST HALF IS TRUE.

Figure 4: Lyric Sheet of "Most Of It Is True" By John Cecil

One of Texas Comedies' original works, *Redscare,* is concerned with McCarthyism in Texas in the 1950s (as one might infer from the title), though it serves as a stark counterpoint to more serious toned theatrical works that examine the same subject, such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible.* The plot follows an educator named George Ebey who becomes principal of a Houston area high school in 1953, after moving to Texas from Oregon. Shortly after starting at his new

job, circumstantial details about his past and his political affiliations spark an investigation by the school board, in particular spurred by the Minute Women, an organization of suburban housewives founded to contribute to the home front of the ideological war on communism. A side story involves a music and drama teacher at the same high school being recruited by a federal agent to be a civilian asset and spy on his friends and colleagues. The central joke of the story is that the would-be victims of the titular red scare George Ebey and Mr. Wilkes, far from being the noble martyrs one might expect in a story like this, are comically cowardly and pushovers. Ebey's reaction to being investigated is to pretend to be as outwardly and obtusely patriotic as possible, which is conveyed by the lyrics to the song "March right out in front of the parade," the title of which references a quote attributed to Chairman Mao that "one does not start a parade, one finds the existing parade and moves to the front."

AT HOME I'VE GOT A KID WHO LOOKS UP TO ME
THINKS I'M SMART AND STRONG AND WISE
I'LL TEACH THAT BOY THAT SOMETIMES
YOU HAVE TO DO MORE THAN COMPROMISE
(verse)

C7 E / C7 E / C7 E / C 7 E
15.
I'M GONNA SHOW NO SENSE OF SHAME
I'M GONNA BEAT THEM AT THEIR GAME
BE THE BIGGEST OF THE SNAKES
BE THE FAKEST OF THE FAKES
A6 / C7 / E B E
AND ALL THEIR DOUBTS WILL FADE
OPINIONS WILL BE SWAYED
I'M GONNA MARCH RIGHT OUT IN FRONT OF THE
PARADE
IF IT'S MADHOUSE, I'LL BE MADDEST
IF IT'S A BAD PLACE, I'LL BE BADDEST
IF I'M IN HELL, I'LL BE THE DEVIL
I'LL TAKE IT TO A LOWER LEVEL
I AM IN ON THE CHARADE
I SIGN UP FOR THE CRUSADE
I'M GONNA MARCH RIGHT OUT IN FRONT OF THE

PARADE

Figure 5: Lyric and Chord Sheet of “March Right Out In Front of the Parade” by John Cecil

An exchange of dialogue as an interlude in said song between Ebey and his secretary, Ms. Shreve, further accentuates the central character’s apparent lack of courage and disinclination to stand up to persecution:

SHREVE: (taking notes) Mr. Ebey, I’m just about to do the morning announcements. Anything you want to announce?

EBEY: Yes, Miss Shreve, announce that we’re changing the name of the school.

SHREVE: What’s the matter with “Woodrow Wilson?”

EBEY: He’s the League of Nations fellow.

SHREVE: He’s not a local boy?

EBEY: We’ll change the name, just to be on the safe side.

SHREVE: Then what do we call it?

EBEY: What about “Houston” or “Austin” or “Travis?”

SHREVE: All taken...

EBEY: Then just leave it now as “High School” We’ll think of something. After that, take down the flag out front.

SHREVE: Not the Red Hawks Rampage flag!?

EBEY: It’s too red.

SHREVE: That's because we're the Red Hawks...

EBEY: We'll be the White Hawks, then. A nice white flag.

SHREVE: White is the color of surrender.

EBEY: And that's exactly what I'm doing.

Figure 6: Script Excerpt from *Redscare* by Texas Comedies, 2018

Many of the attendees at Austin venues where Texas Comedies' shows are performed such as the Dougherty Arts center could be expected to have an inherent affinity to Ebey's predicament and to the vilifying of those who perpetrate the titular redscare: the Minute Women, the strong-arming federal agent, the ineffectual school board that humors the rampant paranoia. Cecil and his family and friends have often discussed the politics of the shows after performances and in casual social settings before and after the shows and frequently espouse left-wing political views. And yet, the more liberal characters in Redscare, Mr. Ebey and choir teacher Mr. Wilkes, are not wholly sympathetic, to say the least. Ebey's song pointedly expresses that he will "show no sense of shame" as he tries to protect himself by crafting a persona that both perfectly aligns with those of his investigators and is diametrically opposed to his own sincere convictions. Mr. Wilkes, despite rightfully opposing and resisting the invasive, espionage tactics that agent Dixon (played in the recent production by local veteran of both musical theater and rock bands Heath Alyn) engages in, easily capitulates to Dixon's recruitment and collects intelligence on both Mr. Ebey and his coffee-house, beatnik folk musician peers.

This is a mechanism through which the central message, satirizing and critiquing McCarthyism, can be expressed without potentially coming across as too politically tendentious to audiences in smaller towns that may have more skeptical and critical views of liberal

American politics as well. This is a delicate balancing act that pervades much of the rest of Cecil's takes on Texas History as well. In fact, despite these efforts, Cecil himself had doubts as to the viability of *Redscare* for his tours. While many of the other productions of Texas Comedies have resonances with specific small towns in Texas often simply by virtue of taking place in or near them, *Redscare* takes place in Houston, a city with a much larger population and consequently a much larger live theater scene of its own than many of the other locations Texas Comedies has visited. Cecil believed this meant there would be less of a perceived novelty of a travelling theater troupe performing a quaint musical comedy to a Houston audience. On top of that, while much of the writing, scoring and characterization as analyzed above filters or dilutes the left leaning political associations with other anti-McCarthyist works, Cecil opined from his experiences that the demographic differences between the Austin audiences and those at his tours were too great even with the attempted adjustments and, ultimately, has decided not to take it on tour (although recent conversations imply that may soon change). As he characterizes it, for many of the older and more conservative theatergoers, fear of communism is still more potent in their memory and their consciousness than denunciations of the excesses of anti-communist paranoia by literati:

> Researching it and getting into it, you realize gosh, almost all these traits are still in American and Texas politics really obviously…the reactionary sort of conservatism, I mean c'mon you can just change some of the words and you've almost got the same stuff there. So I felt like in one way it was a little too close to home that made it seem too contemporary, like "oh this is a political show," and especially last year people were kinda sick of politics but then on the other hand people don't know that much about this story because it's not New York or Los Angeles, it's Texas. "Was there a Red Scare in Texas?" Yeah and that's what the show is about but I don't think people go "oh the Red Scare in Texas." But there's still people especially with the older crowd, who'll say "no I don't wanna deal with that." That's where communist and socialist are still big words (J. Cecil, personal interview, July 16, 2019).

Another production, *Alamo Aftermath* approaches one of the most romanticized moments in Texas history, which is at the core of the valorizing historical narrative of the authors of Texan independence, from a more odd, idiosyncratic angle. *Alamo Aftermath* doesn't dwell too heavily on the actual battle of the Alamo, though it does devote several scenes and a song to a heroic depiction of the avenging of said loss in the battle of San Jacinto. Instead, the framing device of the story is a dispute over land rights that occurred after the battles wherein Tejano hero of the Texan war of independence Jose Antonio Menchaca (played in the most recent productions by Phil Rodriguez, himself of Tejano descent) is the protagonist instead of a more famous Anglo-American hero such as James Bowie, Edward Burleson or Davy Crockett, who only have minor cameos. The plot concerns Menchaca attempting to reclaim his estate after it has been occupied by a con artist who had joined, and then subsequently deserted, the Texian Revolutionary army simply to gain the promised reward of a land grant. The script mentions, albeit briefly in passing, that Menchaca and men like him have roots in Texas that extend many decades further back than most of the white American settlers whose influx into the region helped precipitate the cause of independence from Mexico, though Cecil's story does not touch on the importance of said settlers' desire to preserve the institution of slavery in catalyzing the revolution:

JUDGE: Precisely. Well said. Gentlemen, briefly state your activities in the war. (to Stephens) Write this down.

STEPHENS: Of course.

MENCHACA:Thank you, your honor. My family first came to San Antonio in the last century... when the great...

STEPHENS AND JUDGE: No! No!

MENCHACA: I beg your pardon?

JUDGE: I told you, no history of the Spanish Conquest.

STEPHENS: Please.

MENCHACA: Where should I start?

JUDGE: Start at the action bits. From the war... When you abandoned...

Figure 7: Script Excerpt from *Alamo Aftermath,* Texas Comedies, 2019

This moment at once puts a modicum of emphasis on the long rich history of Texas and its Hispanic roots prior to its independence and subsequent joining the United States while also voicing, via the audience surrogate characters of the Judge and his secretary Stephens, an aversion to being educated about history and a desire to talk about more entertaining matters (e.g. drama, violence and passion). Menchaca proceeds to recount to the court the story of how his family evacuated their San Antonio home in the wake of the advancing army of Santa Anna and flee with his wife Teresa to Gonzales at the advice of Jim Bowie, believing that Santa Anna would treat a propertied Tejano man and his family as traitors. He was then recruited somewhat reluctantly by Edward Burleson to be a lieutenant in the (then) Texian army under Juan Seguin, knowing that their officer corps had few representatives who were Tejano, and realizing that it was useful to have someone like him on hand for that reason: "we have many men of property; we have few who are Tejanos like yourself." Menchaca agrees, while his wife and family are forced to flee to a safe distance from the occupying forces. In a moment when Menchaca's wife Teresa Ramon pleads with him not to separate from his family, the script mixes the inherent pathos of the situation with a quick moment of satire about the contrived and transitory nature of national identity in the context of a territory situated between two competing rival political powers, neither of whom represents the interests of its original inhabitants:

TERESA: Jose Antonio, the population is fleeing Bexar (BAY-har) in fear, and rushing east to cross the Sabine (sa-BEEN).

MENCHACA: Not everyone is fleeing, Teresa. Men like me will stay and defend.

TERESA: (somehow with wagon wheel...?) Then who will defend your wife and one, two, three, four children? Would you have us traverse the prairie, unprotected? It is a wet season, and our wagon has a broken wheel.

MENCHACA: I fixed that wheel.

TERESA: You have done enough for these Americans, these newly-minted Texians.

MENCHACA: Texicans.

TERESA: I think it's Texians. You've already acted as their spy and been arrested for their cause.

MENCHACA: Their cause is my cause...

TERESA: Is it? I have my doubts.

MENCHACA: Do you forget my father died in prison in the uprising of 1813?

TERESA: I could not forget. I hear of it often.

MENCHACA: Can I do less than my father?

TERESA: You can do more. You can NOT die in prison. You know that if the Texians lose…which is likely… the Mexican army won't send you back to the United States with the rest of the Americans. No. There will be no amnesty for you.

Figure 8: Script Excerpt from *Alamo Aftermath,* Texas Comedies, 2019

Immediately prior to this scene, Menchaca leads the ensemble in the song "San Antonio," stylistically an uptempo country dance whose lyrics describe Menchaca enjoying a ball held in honor of Davy Crockett when he initially received news (relayed in the scene by Jim Bowie) that Santa Anna was coming. The strong emphasis on the first and third beats, the choreography reminiscent of Texas two-stepping in recent stagings, and the spoke-sung narrative

verses between sung choruses are qualities associated with both country and folk genres that are often racially coded as white, and the tune conveys a sense of carefree obliviousness contrasted ironically with the impending peril. The fact that the very next scene discusses the serious risks that Menchaca, Teresa, and their family faced in participating in the Texas Revolution, risks that were not equally shared by his compatriots demonstrates one approach to using music and comedy to filter a social message. The song "San Antonio" prepares the audience to think of Menchaca as a Texan who likes country music and two-stepping just like many of the predominantly white, small town Texans for whom *Aftemath* is at least in part written to appeal to. Immediately after being framed in such a manner, the script simultaneously draws attention to the unique experience of a slightly less known non-Anglo figure of the Texas revolution and injects an understated ridicule of the changing nature of nationalist and ethnic labels and identities ("isn't it silly how these revolutionaries don't all even agree on what they're called?").

Alamo Aftermath contrasts Menchaca with Bernard Barnaby, the man on the other side of the dispute in the courtroom framing device and the closest thing to a proper villain in the story. Barnaby is a reprobate, cowardly opportunist who came to Texas from Georgia after acquiring a fraudulent deed to a tract of land, and running from a vengeful husband who he cuckolded. The song "Gone To Texas" has a rousing, adventurous chorus about he and his brother's pursuit of their fortune by coming to "a great new nation," though its lyrics also deromanticize settlers like Barnaby who came to Texas from neighboring American states. While Menchaca is an honorable, propertied man with decades of roots and entitlement from the Spanish crown in his family's past, Barnaby and men like him are pathetic crooks or drifters running away from debt, the law, financial failure or all of the above. Barnaby and his brother Ernest come to Texas finding the estate they thought was theirs rightfully owned and occupied by a strong-willed,

feisty Texan woman named Margaret, and the two decide to enlist in the Texian/Texican army out of desperation due to the promise of a six hundred and twenty acre bounty. Barnaby tries to profiteer from the war by stealing and selling the revolutionary troops' horses, deserts his post before even having the chance to see actual combat and is ultimately exposed as a deserter and a fraud by his own brother, who has fallen in love and married Margaret (portrayed in the most recent performances by choreographer Megan Ortiz) in the courtroom at the end.

The above mentioned "Most of it is true" was at one time included as the show's opener but in recent performances on the road it was decided to replace it with another song previously used at a later point in the score in its most recent prior iteration called "Don't believe a word of it." As with "Most of It is True" the song foregrounds the often ambiguous and blurry barrier between historical fact, individual and collective memory, and the inevitable process of sculpting facts and events into a narrative.

DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF IT
S'ALRIGHT, I KNOW YOU DON'T
DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF IT
S'ALRIGHT, I KNOW YOU DON'T
(I I I) I ADMIT IT THAT MY STORY SEEMS CRAZY
(I I I) I ADMIT IT THAT MY STORY SEEMS MAD
BUT I TELL YOU THAT MY STORY IS LEGITIMATE
IT IS GRIPPING BUT IT REALLY DRAWS YOU INTO IT
GEOGRAPHICAL BUT ALSO INTERMITTENTLY SAD

DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF IT
S'ALRIGHT, I KNOW YOU DON'T
DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF IT
S'ALRIGHT, I KNOW YOU DON'T
NO NO NO NO-ONES EVER DONE IT QUITE LIKE WE DID
NO NO NO NO ONE EVER THOUGHT THAT WE WOULD COME BACK
THOUGHT THE ARMY THEY WOULD KILL US JUST FOR PRACTICE

THOUGHT THEY'D HURRY UP AND CATCH US AND
ATTACK US
WE TURNED THE TABLES ON THEM, WHEN WE DID A
SUDDEN ATTACK
DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF IT
S'ALRIGHT, I KNOW YOU DON'T
DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF IT
S'ALRIGHT, I KNOW YOU DON'T

Figure 9: Lyric Sheet of "Don't Believe a word of It" by John Cecil

Most curious is the way the script and music subtly convey conflicting emotions about the battles of the Alamo and San Jacinto. When Menchaca is first told about the Alamo by Edward Burleson, it is accompanied by the ballad "Till I Forget," a song concerned with the pathos of a nameless individual soldier driven to alcoholism to drown the trauma of combat. Explicit reference to addiction is hidden in this version, since this song had been used in an earlier production from the voice of a veteran of World War I in a story set during Prohibition and the context made this aspect more obvious. It has the most lugubrious, sorrowful melody in the show and is sung at a moment when the characters are mourning the soldiers whose deaths would be used to justify the continued revolutionary cause and which is responsible for generating one of the most famous employments of the phrase "never forget" alongside the Holocaust and Guy Fawkes. While other military-themed songs in the show have a more jingoistic tone and lyrics (the recruitment march "We Need you," the ballad of the San Jacinto triumph "We Won"), this particular song has the most poignant melody (based on the feedback of audience members) and is used to accompany the most solemn moment of reflection and mourning about war in the script. This solemnity is almost immediately undercut with a comedic moment when Menchaca has to be reminded the name of the battle that they are never supposed to forget.

WORN-OUT, WINDED, WOUNDED, WET
GOING TO KEEP GOING GOING GOING TILL
I FORGET
BOMBS AND BATTLE, BAYONET
GOING TO KEEP GOING GOING GOING
TILL I FORGET
FORGET YOUR VOICE LIVING IN MY HEAD
FORGET EVERY SINGLE WORD YOU SAID
FORGET ALL THE MEMORIES IN MY MIND
I WILL BE FORGETTING ALL THE TIME
MARCH AND MOVE, ENEMY MET
GOING TO KEEP GOING GOING GOING TILL
I FORGET
REGROUP, RETREAT, SOME REGRET
GOING TO KEEP GOING GOING GOING TILL
I FORGET
FORGET YOUR VOICE LIVING IN MY HEAD
FORGET EVERY SINGLE WORD YOU SAID
FORGET ALL THE MEMORIES IN MY MIND
I WILL BE FORGETTING ALL THE TIME
WORN-OUT, WINDED, WOUNDED, WET
GOING TO KEEP GOING GOING GOING
TILL I FORGET

MENCHACA
We will never forget the battle of the...
BURLESON
Alamo.

Figure 10: Lyric Sheet of "'Till I Forget" by John Cecil

Similar presentation of gravitas mixed with an undercutting or deflating thereof occurs via the treatment of Sam Houston. Burleson makes light of the general's alleged tendency to alcohol abuse and one of Houston's speeches to rouse his troops and commemorate the fallen of the Alamo and other skirmishes of the war is also presented in a comical fashion. The actor portraying Houston (Josh Meinderstma in the spring 2019 performances) conveys this speech as semi-improvised interjections of lofty sounding words as expected clichés in speeches of this

sort while Menchaca describes said speech to the court in his narration (the script includes suggestions for ad libs):

HOUSTON
(spoken under MENCHACA's
next line)
Suffering... of those... Alamo... don't forget
Goliad ...trust...cannon… brave... heroic...
words of encouragement.... never give up...
MENCHACA
Houston spoke eloquently. He dwelt
pathetically upon the suffering of those
who had fallen at the Alamo, and upon
those who fell at Goliad, under Fannin.
HOUSTON

Figure 11: Script Excerpt from *Alamo Aftermath*, Texas Comedies, 2019

Shortly after Burleson and Menchaca persuade Houston to make an offensive against Santa Anna, the male ensemble sings the celebratory ballad "We Won" that describes the victory of San Jacinto and, ultimately, the defeat and capture of Santa Anna himself.

Texas Comedies' 2019 production *The Feud* illustrates a whole other set of issues concerning Texas history, in particular the romanticization of Wild West era violence and feuds between rival family groups. As the title indicates, *The Feud* is about the conflict between the Sutton and Taylor families during Reconstruction in DeWitt County. The story follows a former major in the Union (a quasi-historical figure given the humorous name of Major Sapp in this rendering) in his assignment to stabilize the situation in the midst of the fights between the Taylor family, here presented as a band of murderous outlaws, and the local state police who are allied and intertwined with the rival Sutton family and whose methods have devolved into vigilantism and mob justice. Phil Rodriguez, who had earlier portrayed the more heroic and

dignified Menchaca in *Alamo Aftermath*, portrayed the leader of the Taylor gang Goodbread "Doboy" Taylor while Josh Meinderstma portrayed major Sapp and other regular associates of Texas Comedies Carl Guthrie play Sheriff Jack Helm and Megan Ortiz plays Doboy's jilted lover April. Through the process of both research for the script and interacting with audience members in small town touring performances, members of Texas Comedies have encountered the very romanticization that *The Feud* lampoons. On occasion, members have even had conversations with descendants of these families, serving as opportunities to reflect on how historical distance affects attitudes towards certain eras. In Cecil's recollection:

> You can read interviews with people who are Taylors where they'll say "well they just weren't the type of people who would not stand down" and we had somebody like that who came to the show, from Dewitt county and she was a super avid Taylor historian and I just wanted to say to her "Ma'am they were all people that you wouldn't want to be in the room with'" because they were scary. Back then you could shoot somebody and you could ride across town, ride to another county and change your name and get away with it (J. Cecil, personal interview, July 16, 2019).

Consequently, *The Feud* makes no attempt to mince words about what sort of people it's portraying and even mines their atrocious deeds for dark comedy. Doboy and the Taylor gang are described as being unrepentant robbers, murderers and even rapists (the latter obliquely and briefly mentioned in a lyric to the song "A Quiet life") and as having inherent antipathy for a Union soldier like Sapp. Likewise, the lack of due process, trigger happy and bloodthirsty approach to law enforcement employed by the Suttons is played for queasy laughs, even making a joke about lynching.[93] Doboy's escape from prison is accompanied by the song *Family*, a song whose lyrics directly juxtapose a jaunty, silly, almost children's song tune (and a band

[93] In one scene upon accidentally apprehending Doboy, Sapp is greeted by Jack Helm and his Deputy, who gleefully prepare to tie a noose around his neck. When Sapp objects they assume he simply has an issue with the method of execution and respond with 'oh I see you want to shoot him' 'I like drowning myself'.

arrangement that has an almost ska-ish offbeat guitar line) with a list of horrific acts that he and his family have committed over the years. This represents a particularly absurd take on the trope of expressing one's reliance on their family for support.

WHO HELPED ME WHEN I FOUGHT IN SCHOOL
BEAT ON THE SCHOOL MASTER WITH A METAL TOOL
WHO HELPED ME TO BEAT ON HIS HEAD
WAS MY COUSIN ED.... THANK YOU, COUSIN ED
WHO HELPED ME ON THE DAY THAT I
SHOT A MAN IN RENO JUST TO WATCH HIM DIE
WHO HELPED ME GET AWAY THAT NIGHT
WAS MY COUSIN DWIGHT.... MY OTHER COUSIN
DWIGHT

IT'S MY FAMILY, MY FAMILY
THEY'LL BE AT THE GALLOWS WHEN I FALL
IT'S MY FAMILY, MY FAMILY
IT'S THEIR FAULT I'M THIS WAY, AFTER ALL
WHO HELPED ME WHEN I NEEDED BAIL
WHO HELPED ME BUSTING OUT OF JAIL
WHO HELPED ME TO KILL THE JAILER, TOO
MY COUSIN LOU (I OWE YOU COUSIN LOU)
IT'S MY FAMILY, MY FAMILY
THEY'LL BE AT THE GALLOWS WHEN I FALL
IT'S MY FAMILY, MY FAMILY
IT'S THEIR FAULT I'M THIS WAY, AFTER ALL
I LOVE THEM
EVEN THOUGH I KNOW THAT THEY ARE FLAWED
THEY TAUGHT ME EVERYTHING I KNOW
BOUT KIDNAPPING, LARCENY
BRIBERY AND FORGERY
MURDER, ROBBERY, ARSON AND FRAUD
WHO HELPED ME WITH MY LAST ATTACK
HELPED ME TIE THEM UP AND SHOOT THEM IN THE
BACK
WHO HELPED ME HIDE THE EVIDENCE
MY AUNT FLORENCE... SHE'S NOT REALLY MY AUNT
IT'S MY FAMILY, MY FAMILY
WHEN IN TROUBLE, THEY'RE THE ONES I CALL
IT'S MY FAMILY, MY FAMILY
THEY MESSED ME UP AS A KID THOUGH
I BLAME THEM FOR WHAT I DID SO

Figure 12: Lyric Sheet of "Family" by John Cecil

In contrast to *Alamo Aftermath*, all of the principal characters are coded as white (although Ortiz and Rodriguez are hispanic the Taylors were not, and while April's sister May was played by African-American actress Kera Wright (then Bley), in the Austin performances, there is no allusion to the significance of her having any different ethnic background than her sister), and some of the real-life racial dimensions of the violent period that the musical draws from are omitted, or at least sublimated. According to Cecil's research, several of the acts of violence committed by the Taylors were against black union soldiers who they believed to have been uppity to them. In Cecil's description of the adaptation process:

> What's left out of *The Feud* was a lot of the racial element. The feud [of the title] initiated with the killing of black soldiers, black union soldiers. In Mason Texas, which is where we're gonna be performing in September, that was where it started, a black union soldier was shot dead in the street by one of the Taylors and nobody did anything and that started law enforcement and the rival family getting involved. I just didn't know how to handle all of that in the context of a madcap comedy…..just straight out including something like 'oh we shot a black man dead and nothing happened in the middle of the street.' I thought that it would be a stronger thing to have an African American actor play Sapp. Because then you never have to say it was because he was black because those characters would hate the army guy anyway. If Josh [Meinderstema who portrayed Sapp] hadn't been available that's what I wanted to try to do (J. Cecil, personal interview, July 16, 2019).

While this could be criticized as a problematic erasure of an important aspect of the history described in the play, this comment is also one of the most salient demonstrations of the perceptions about musical theater's proper place in the matrix of popular culture expressed on the part of a creator or creative team. While there are plenty of musicals lauded as *serious* and

even many of the more comedic or light-hearted examples will still include examinations of serious social issues, the fans and even many of the makers of musicals often retain a set of assumptions about their efficacy in tackling *important* subject matter (which relates the *discourse of prestige* to the artform itself rather than just specific organizations or performances). For Cecil, there was an inherent difficulty, in his mind, in using the milieu of musical comedy to describe a subject like a black soldier being murdered with impunity simply for being uppity to a man whose own living descendants still have recently rationalized his violent behavior as merely a result of being "proud" and "not someone who would stand down."[94] Introducing something as charged and contemporarily relevant as a black man being gunned down in the street with little to no reprisal was not deemed proper to include in, as Cecil termed it "a madcap comedy." In keeping with the pattern of subtle, stealthy conveyance of the satirical message and historical perspectives, Cecil endeavored to allude to the untold component of the black union soldier's death by casting its hero (a composite of real life white soldiers) with a black actor, but was prevented from pursuing this by not having a black (male) actor available.

Cecil finds that music has a unique effect in processing historical themes, satire and apparent tonal dissonance between depicting unsavory chapters from real history and conveying light-hearted entertainment. As Cecil phrases it: "we talk about drownings and killings and extrajudicial murder, even mention rape[95] but it's done in a song and, well, it all goes much better in a song"(J. Cecil personal interview, July 16, 2019). Works like *Redscare* and *Alamo Aftermath* demonstrate an ethos of surreptitious satire and social messaging adopted as a means to avoid polarizing what are, in effect, vastly different potential audiences in different places:

[94] In Cecil's research, an inciting incident in the real-life feud was a black union soldier knocking off Doboy Taylor's hat in an argument, which was the justification for shooting him to death.
[95] The song "A Quiet Life" contains the lyric "although it's a gas to go kick some ass, smash window glass, or rob a stage, or to outrage girls half your age" where *outrage* is a thinly veiled euphemism.

those in Austin and those in smaller towns in the region. For their group and many others who would endeavor to use musical theater to bridge between places like Austin and a town like Sherman or Columbus, the challenges they face are where the boundaries between satire and insensitivity lie, and whether it is better to pursue entertainment or edification. It is also relevant that Crank Collective/Texas Comedies' modus operandi has been described by its members as crafting 'comedies' that are entertaining and perhaps educational without being, as some in the company have termed it "too preachy." Furthermore, some of the perception about when proverbial lines have been crossed have arisen from a process of trial and error, one which is continually ongoing.

Something Classic But New: SoundBeacon Entertainment

Cecil and Texas Comedies' contribution to local original works illustrate the complex maneuvering between satire, accessibility, political discourse, and regional vectors of identity on the state, city and municipal level while embracing the label of *Texas* musicals. Other original works by local writers and directors may not have the same overt interaction with the sundry entanglements of a specifically "Texan" identity and branding but they do also reflect the challenges of local organizations, communities and individual creative talents to contribute to and expand on a scene that faces the many challenges observed throughout this study. Another such group is SoundBeacon Entertainment. SoundBeacon is a recently created production company whose founders include Glenna Bowman, Matthew Burnett Shead and Tomas Azar.

Several of the original works featured so far have been on religious subject matter or have titles with obvious Christian implications such as full length musical theater works like *Gabriel, Pack Your Trumpet, Keeping our Eyes on God* and individual small group pieces and songs such as *Jesus is Beside Me, God is Watching Over You¸ Go and Make Disciples* etc. The

mission statement on their website[96], however, does not espouse an explicit focus on Christian themes or identity, stating merely that their purpose is "to entertain audiences through music and live performance with a focus on musical theatre: to share stories that challenge, support and inspire our daily lives and artistic pursuits." In 2018, SoundBeacon cast and performed a staged reading at Zachary Scott's Kleberg stage of one of their works in progress which is a musical take on the Biblical story of Esther titled simply *Esther, A New Musical*.

Producing original Christian-themed musical theater in Texas is a fascinating and multivalent counterpoint to the dynamics observed through my participation and observation of commercially successful, known shows with religious connections like *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* in central Texas. The state of Texas is often characterized as "the buckle of the bible belt,"[97] being one of the most staunchly republican and religious states in the United States. Austin, Texas on the other hand is not only much more left leaning than the state as a whole, like many capital cities (and indeed like many highly populated urban centers in contrast to their rural surroundings), but is home to some of the most nationally popular Atheist and secular organizations in the country, including the Atheist Community of Austin and Atheists helping the homeless. The former organization has one of the most popular cable access call-in shows focused on secular and atheist activism and debate whose live streams and YouTube archive videos are among the most nationally and internationally famous of their kind on the internet. Austin, Texas, then has some national visibility and prominence as a center of secularism and non-religious identification. Ergo, performing a work based on a story from Christian scripture, even if it is not necessarily intended as a mechanism of proselyting or as

[96] https://www.soundbeaconent.com/home.
[97] http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ct.002, though this distinction is sometimes ascribed to various locations throughout the south.

explicit representation of Christian media, in Austin, Texas in spaces close to the city center, and being hosted at downtown Austin's flagship regional theater, is converse to the experience of staging and performing a highly secularized, and, in its time, counterculturally inclined rendering of a Biblical story to audiences who are comparatively older, more conservative, and more religious in satellites of the greater Austin metropolitan area.

Glenna herself, who conceived of Esther prior to collaborating with Shead and Azar and helping to found SoundBeacon, did not consider this piece to be a "Christian musical," though in commenting on the origins of Esther and of Soundbeacon itself, her remarks reflect the complex intersection between the various demographic poles of religious/secular, conservative/liberal, big city/smalltown that are present in any such endeavor:

> I never designed Esther as a Christian musical, my Christmas musical is a Christian thing. Whereas….Esther in my mind and as Matt and I have approached it is about faith. There's a faith message in it but it's also about people and what we do when we're confronted with challenges in our life. So from that perspective, plus also the people that we market to there's actually a pretty big Christian base in Austin, not everybody sees it because we're a blue county but there are a lot of people in the audiences who are Christian. They may not go to church every Sunday they may not be out there banging their Bibles (and I'm not a Bible banger), but I think even though we are in this area that is blue and liberal and what have you we have definitely had people who are interested in the faith message and in how we respond in trying to stand up for what's right. So I didn't feel as much that the religious thing was a huge part of it, for Esther it's there but I didn't think that was our challenge that we had to overcome (G. Bowman, personal interview, July 17, 2019).

This description is reminiscent of the cautious approach artists of a Christian background or persuasion often have in relating their work to the Christian music industry, and Bowman's description of the central theme in more universalist terms as one of "faith" rather than of

specifically Christian proselytizing is not uncommon.[98] In her discussions with me she emphasized that her attraction to the story of Esther in particular related to how well the book structurally seemed to lend itself to staged, dramatic rendering and, also, its significance for women, Christian or otherwise, since Esther is one of the more prominent female heroic figures of the Old Testament:

> Esther is a short book in the Bible. It's nine chapters but it has so many great events in the story that it actually just popped out at me that this is perfect for musical theater. So it really had to do with how the story was laid out and the things that happened and lots of women over the years have been particularly inspired by the story because she did save her people she had to risk everything including her life to save her people and she was in a situation that she didn't put herself in, she was basically taken away from her family and thrown into the king's harem against her will and it felt like it was a very compelling story with a strong female hero and kind of a fun interesting villain who gets his comeuppance in the end (G. Bowman, personal interview, July 17, 2019).

As in many other cases, the hurdles that greeted Soundbeacon's first phase of Esther's production, which was its staged reading at Zach's Kleburg stage in 2018, was economic:

> There were a lot of challenges finding a space and the question of if can you can do it in for a reasonable price because we didn't have a lot of big investors. I did have people who invested in the show who I'm very grateful for, but trying to find a space that was reasonably priced, or space that was reasonable and available when we needed it, you do have to book pretty far in advance with these places and you need to make sure these places have adequate parking and have adequate resources to support the audience coming in and making sure they have something to eat or drink when they are coming in or in intermission. We were actually really lucky to have Zach, they helped us out a lot and I don't know if we could get that same deal in the future (G. Bowman, personal interview, July 17, 2019).

[98]For example the Hard rock group King's X who often include Christian themes and have at times circulated their music and merchandise through Christian outlets nevertheless have stated several times in interviews that they are absolutely not a Christian rock band: https://www.blabbermouth.net/news/king-s-x-guitarist-we-are-absolutely-not-a-christian-rock-band/.

Despite Bowman et al. distancing themselves from labelling *Esther* a Christian musical in the strictest possible sense, *Esthe*r the musical is a locally specific original work that serves as a demonstration of the same principal expressed in the earlier discussion of *Superstar* with regard to the evolving perception of popular music's relationship to Christianity and the shift in generational perceptions about the propriety of certain types of musical expression, e.g. musical theater as means of promoting faith. Since the 1970s an industry of Christian themed rock and pop music came into existence, proliferated and evoked reactions from critics and music listeners ranging from praise to mockery and ridicule. Ironically, while using rock music to tell the story of Jesus in 1969 was treated as next to blasphemy by many of the most pious, much of popular culture has treated commercial Christian music as a risible, pandering and futile attempt to make Christianity hip.[99] In past decades, Christians balked at using rock music and musical theater to tell stories from the Bible while in more recent times the secular (or even the less devout) often have a similarly dismissive view of the mixing of religion and popular music, though their distaste comes from the exact opposite vector. The intermingling of competing perceptions and values in Christian popular music is similar to the state that musical theater finds itself in: often pulled in different directions by the tastes of different generations and the other styles and subcultures with which it has intersected. As with Texas Comedies' musicals, the creation and performance of SoundBeacon's original works like *Esther* is a process that involved delicately endeavoring to reconcile competing pressures and influences.

Esther's creators: Bowman and book writer Matthew Burnett (now Shead, also a performer and director in other many productions at City Theatre, the Georgetown Palace

[99] This is succinctly and humorously expressed by a quote from *King of the Hill's* Hank Hill addressing a Christian Rocker in Season 8 episode 2: "Don't you understand you're not making Christianity any better you're just making rock and roll worse."

Theatre and others as mentioned earlier), incorporate a variety of popular styles, vernacular language and contemporary humor, while preserving a mostly serious tone and formal language register. *Esther* does not have the same degree of rock and blues influences present in something like *Superstar,* though like *Superstar* and other Biblically themed musicals like Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, it is not exclusive to any one genre or period of musical influences and includes some elements from jazz, rock, classical choral passages, marches, and ballads.

The plot of Esther follows the eponymous book of the Bible relatively closely, though it includes some invented characters to buttress the character and scene dynamics for the purposes of a stage musical adaptation. Set during the Achaemenid Persian empire during the reign of Xerxes (who most historians presume to be the monarch that the actual Biblical text refers to as Ahaseurus) the libretto follows Esther, referred to by her proper given name of Hadassah in the early portion of the script, who is summoned to be part of the emperor's harem after Xerxes deposes and exiles his previous queen Vashti for refusing to respond to his summons. Esther, though initially disheartened at being taken from her family against her will and having no initial interest in trying to curry the king's favor like her fellow concubines, does come to love and respect Xerxes, and is made his queen. Shortly afterwards, Xerxes is manipulated by his vizier Haman, a member of the Agagite tribe who harbors a vengeful hatred for the Israelite people, into decreeing that all Jews in his realm are to be executed, and, consequently, Esther appears to fall out of the king's favor.

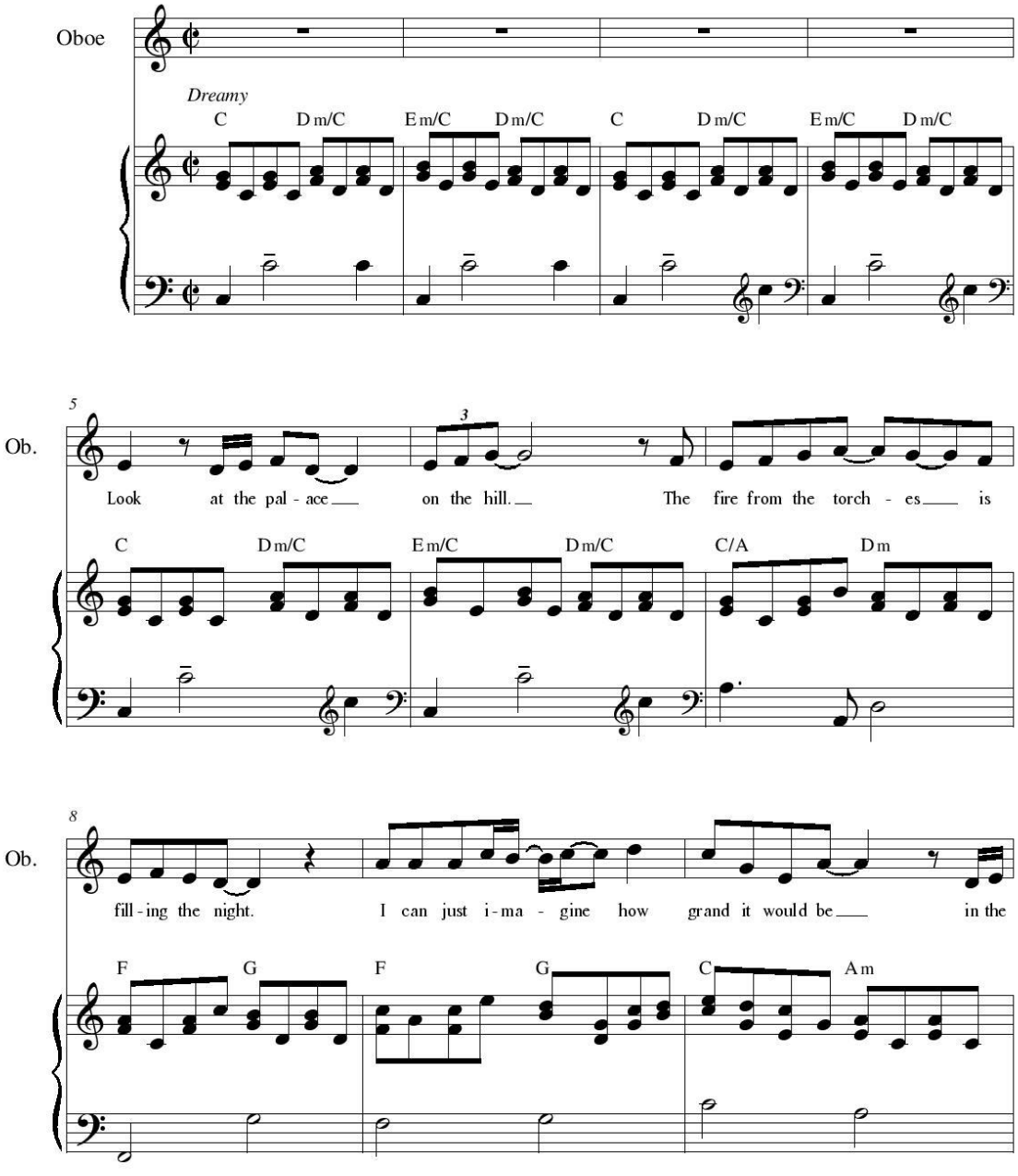
At the urging of her cousin and surrogate father figure Mordecai, she risks her life to seek audience with the King, knowing that if she appears before him unsummoned and he does not extend his scepter to receive her, she could be executed. Xerxes does grant audience to her,

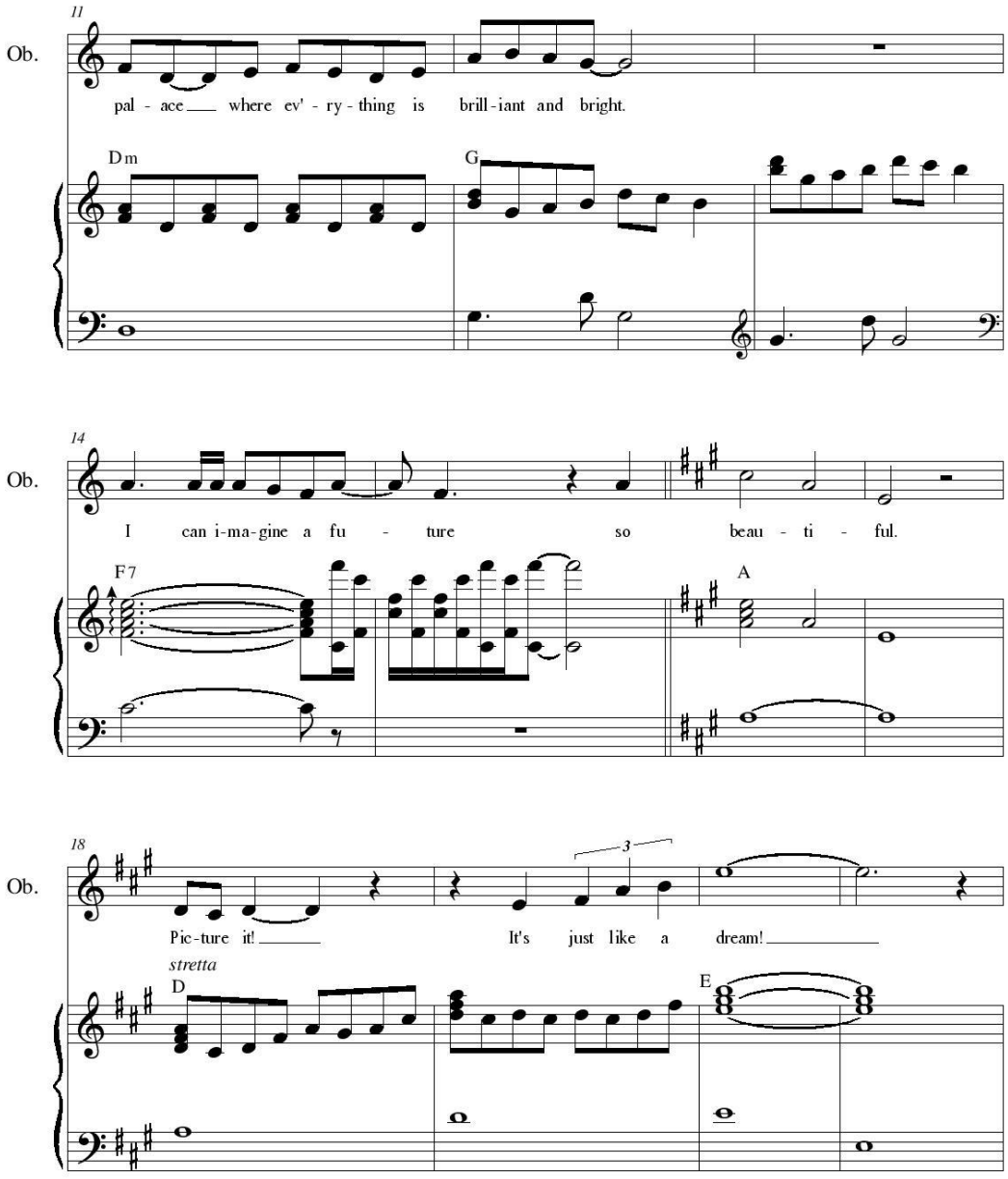
withdraws the decree, and is persuaded instead to execute Haman and replace him with Mordecai as his vizier. Esther is characterized in the libretto as a young woman who wants to travel and experience the world beyond her village, which is set in contrast to her close friend Suri (a character created solely for this stage version) in the opening song "Living the Dream," and who, in the 2018 staged reading, is portrayed by Emily Villarreal, herself not only a performer and educator but also organizer of the Cabernet Cabaret, an intermittent showcase opportunity for local talent in musical theater.

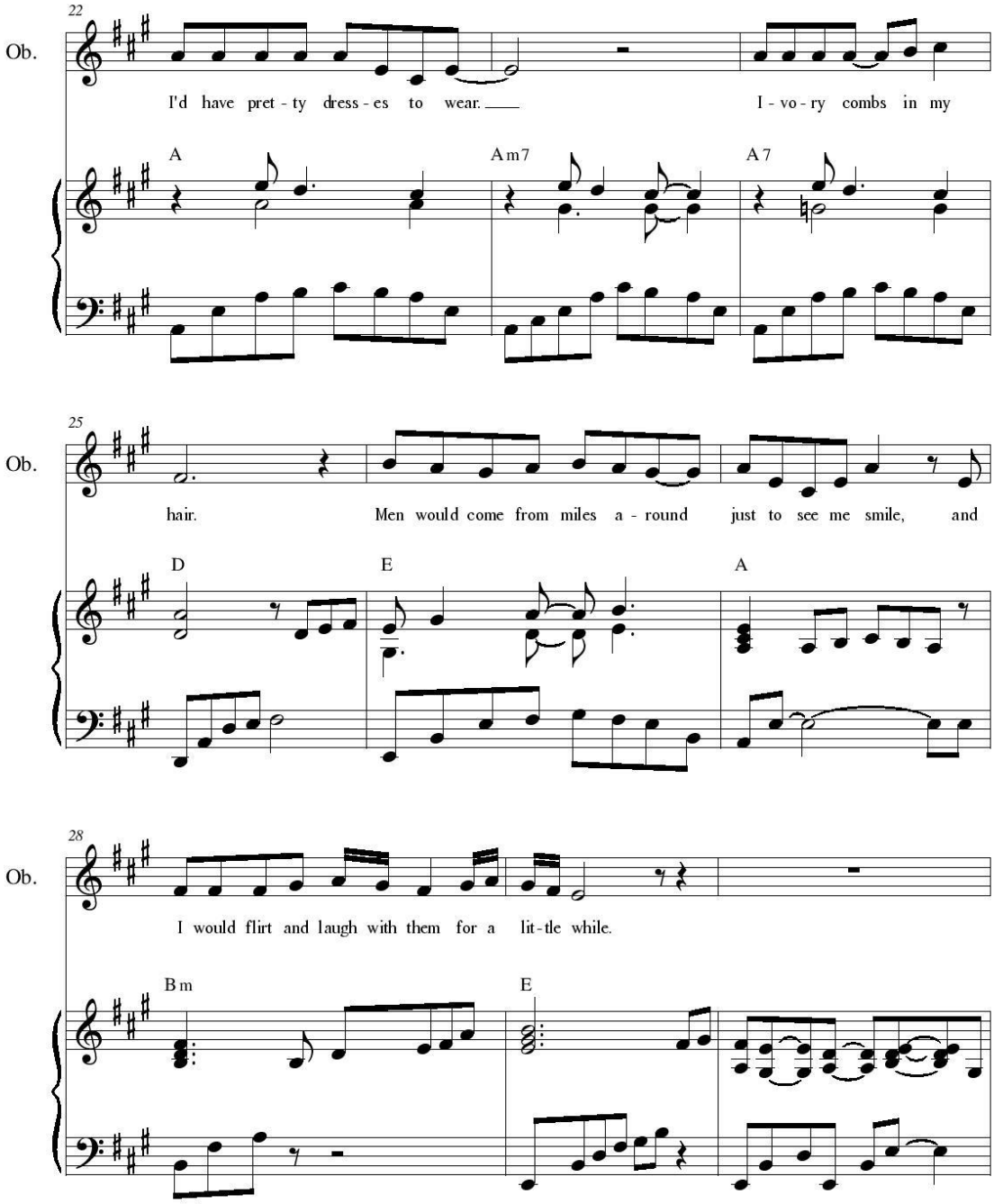
The following excerpt from the score illustrates how Bowman and Burnet insinuate more contemporary values into the story. In the opening verse, Suri, positioned as the lovable ditz archetype companion to Esther admires the opulence and wealth of the imperial palace and the lifestyle of the court, and fantasizes about being lavished upon and admired by men as the pinnacle that a pretty young girl such as her can aspire to. Esther's verse instead equates the titular "living the dream" with the caravans who travel to other parts of the empire and the promise of seeing new, exotic, and exciting places in other lands, rather than being ensconced in a comfortable insular world of luxury.

Living the Dream

Music and Lyrics by Glenna Bowman
Additional Music by Thomas Azar




11
Ob.
pal - ace where ev' - ry - thing is brill-iant and bright.
Dm
G
14
Ob.
I can i-ma-gine a fu - ture so beau - ti - ful.
F7
A
18
Ob.
3
Pic-ture it! It's just like a dream!
stretta
D
E


22
Ob.
I'd have pret - ty dress - es to wear. I - vo - ry combs in my
A
Am7
A7
25
Ob.
hair. Men would come from miles a - round just to see me smile, and
D
E
A
28
Ob.
I would flirt and laugh with them for a lit - tle while.
Bm
E

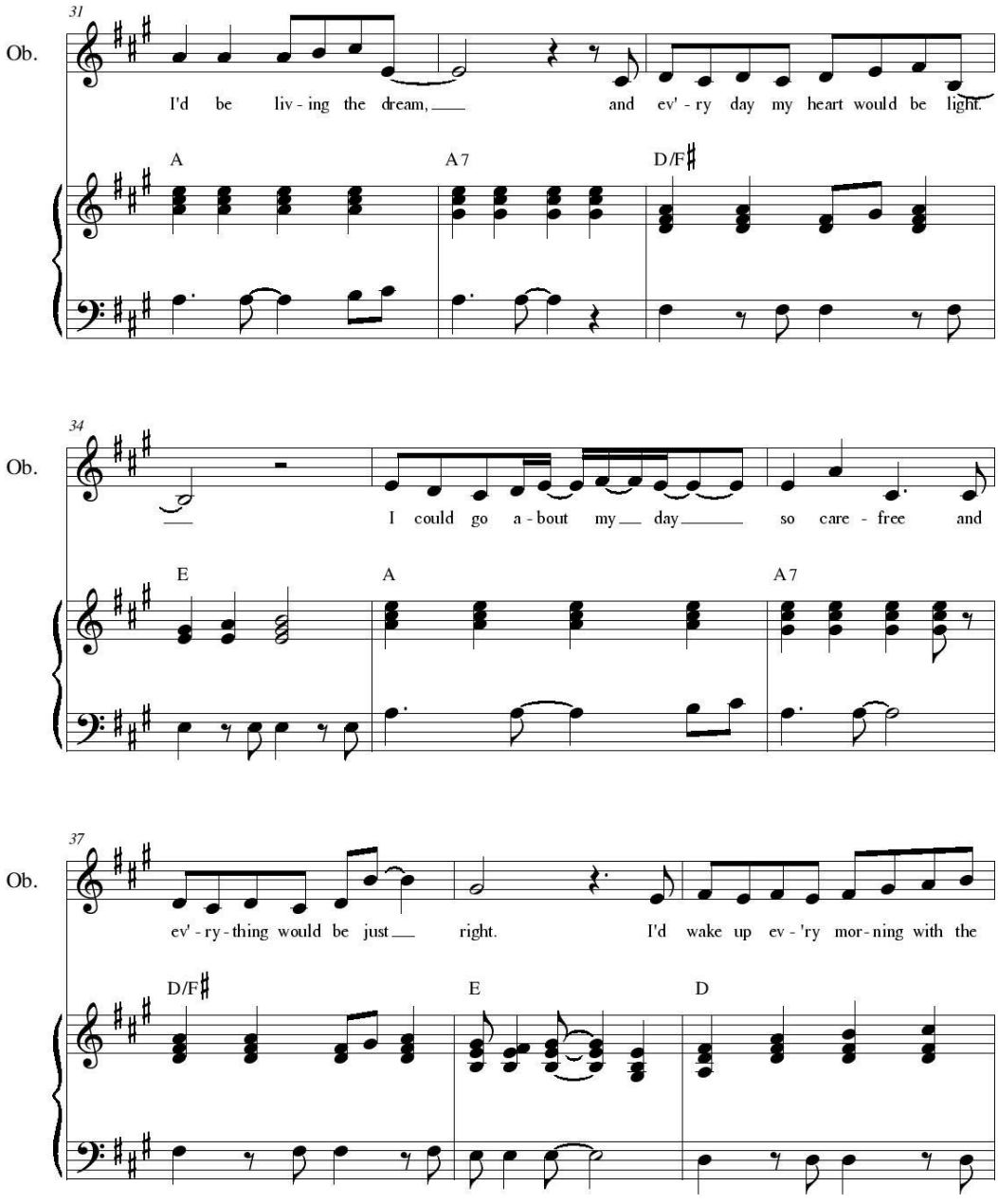


Figure 13, Score for "Living the Dream" by Glenna Bowman

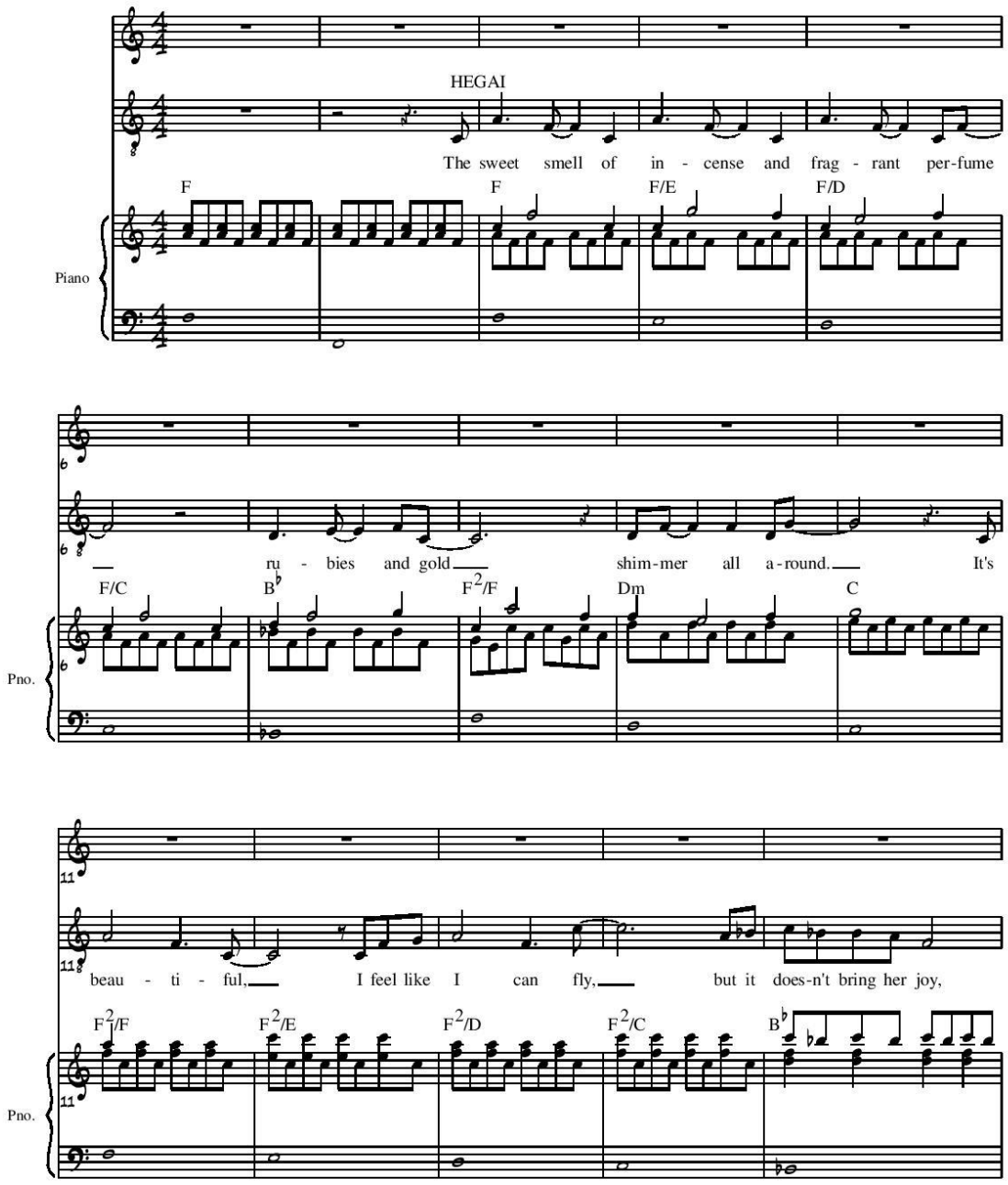
This song stylistically recalls earlier musicals from the so-called Golden age like Lerner and Loewe or Rogers and Hammerstein (with Bowman attesting that one of her major inspirations was the score to the former's *Camelot*). The stately, arpeggiating accompaniment, moderate tempo, and long, sustained notes in the melodic line are among the features that Bowman infuses to differentiate the score from many contemporary musicals that she says have a tendency to resort to a "generic pop" sound. The song also serves the story function of establishing two of the principal characters and the audience's sympathies. Suri is portrayed as the more shallow and immature of the two, more enamored of stereotypically 'girlish' interests like 'having pretty dresses to wear, ivory combs in my hair' and, consequently, she is played in the recent reading by a slightly younger actress with a more cherubic vocal quality than actress Ryan Smith, who portrayed Esther. Esther, while not given an obtusely and anachronistically modern feminist assertive personality or ideological leanings, does articulate her desire for knowledge, experiences, and cultural riches instead of simply being a courtesan or an aristocrat's wife, which were among the powerful and most privileged positions available to a woman in the time of the setting. In a sense, the Esther of this libretto is a more modern woman because her aspirations have a direct relation with controlling her own destiny and not accepting limitations.

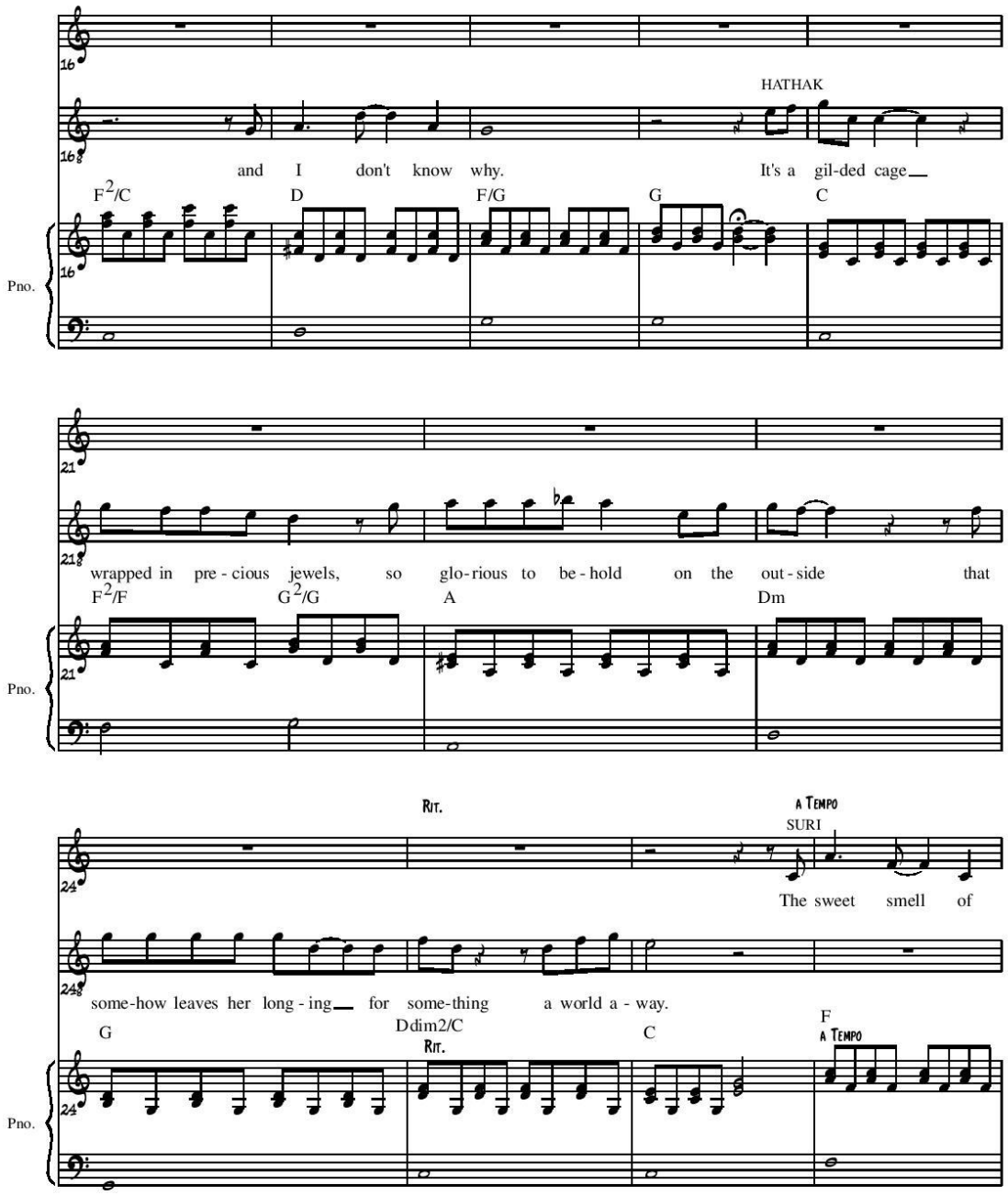
Esther's desire to have agency in her life is a common motivation for many heroines of musicals and remains a central theme of the story after this introduction. Though Esther does not have a stereotypical, solo *I want* song, the closest such piece occurs shortly after Esther and her friend Suri have been accepted into the harem. The song "A Gilded Cage" begins with other members of the palace court: chief Eunuch Hegai and attendant Hathak, pondering why Esther seems so unhappy when she appears to have been granted anything a young woman could want, i.e., the privilege of being in the emperor's harem. Hathak has the insight that for Esther the life

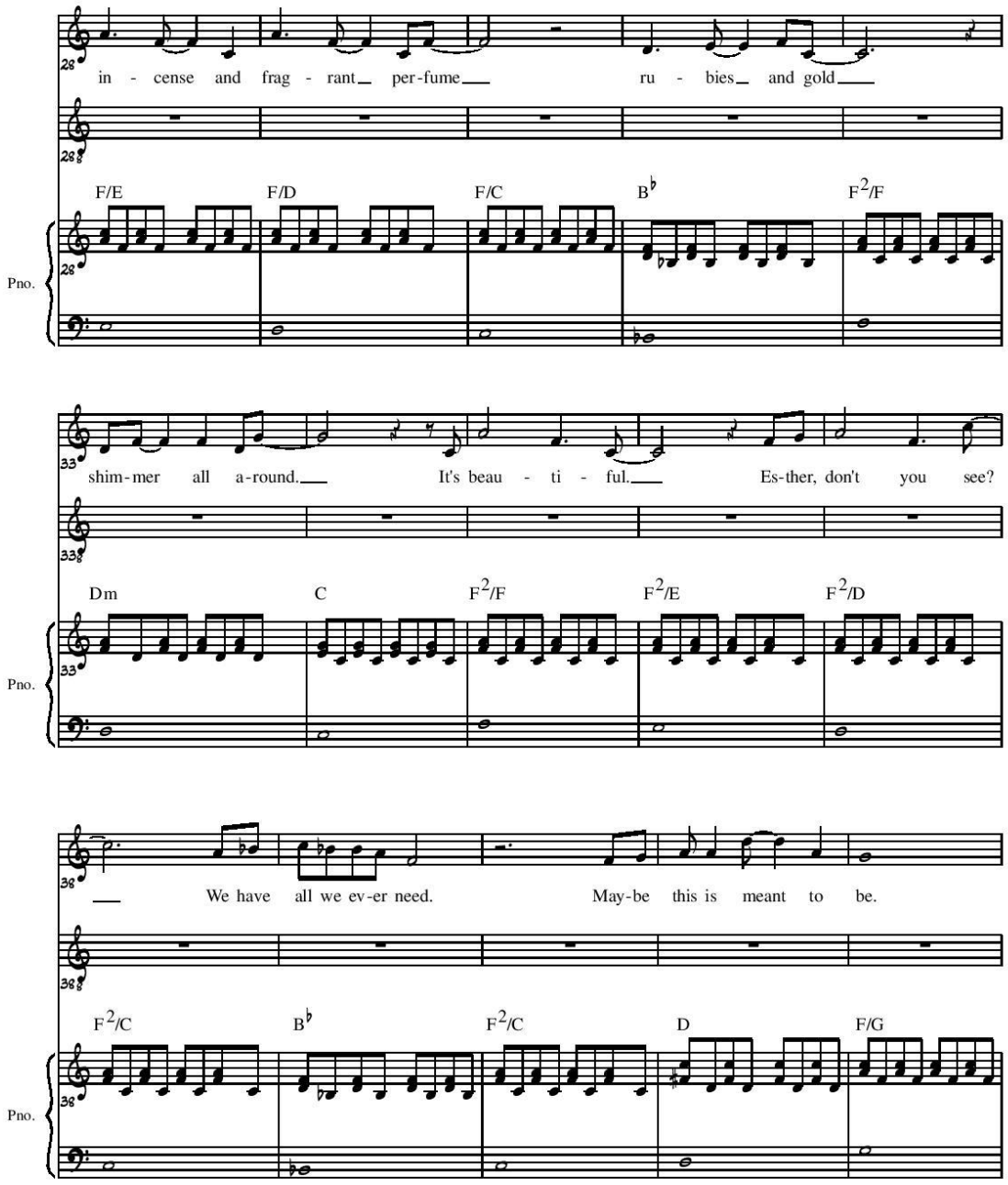
in the court is, as per the title, like living in a gilded cage. Following Hathak and Hegai's verses (these characters functioning partly as comic relief observers not unlike Timon and Pumbah from the Lion King), Esther's portion has her assert that she "wants to go to the market, I want to run through the street I want to choose my destiny instead of my fate choosing me" (mm. 44, page 4).

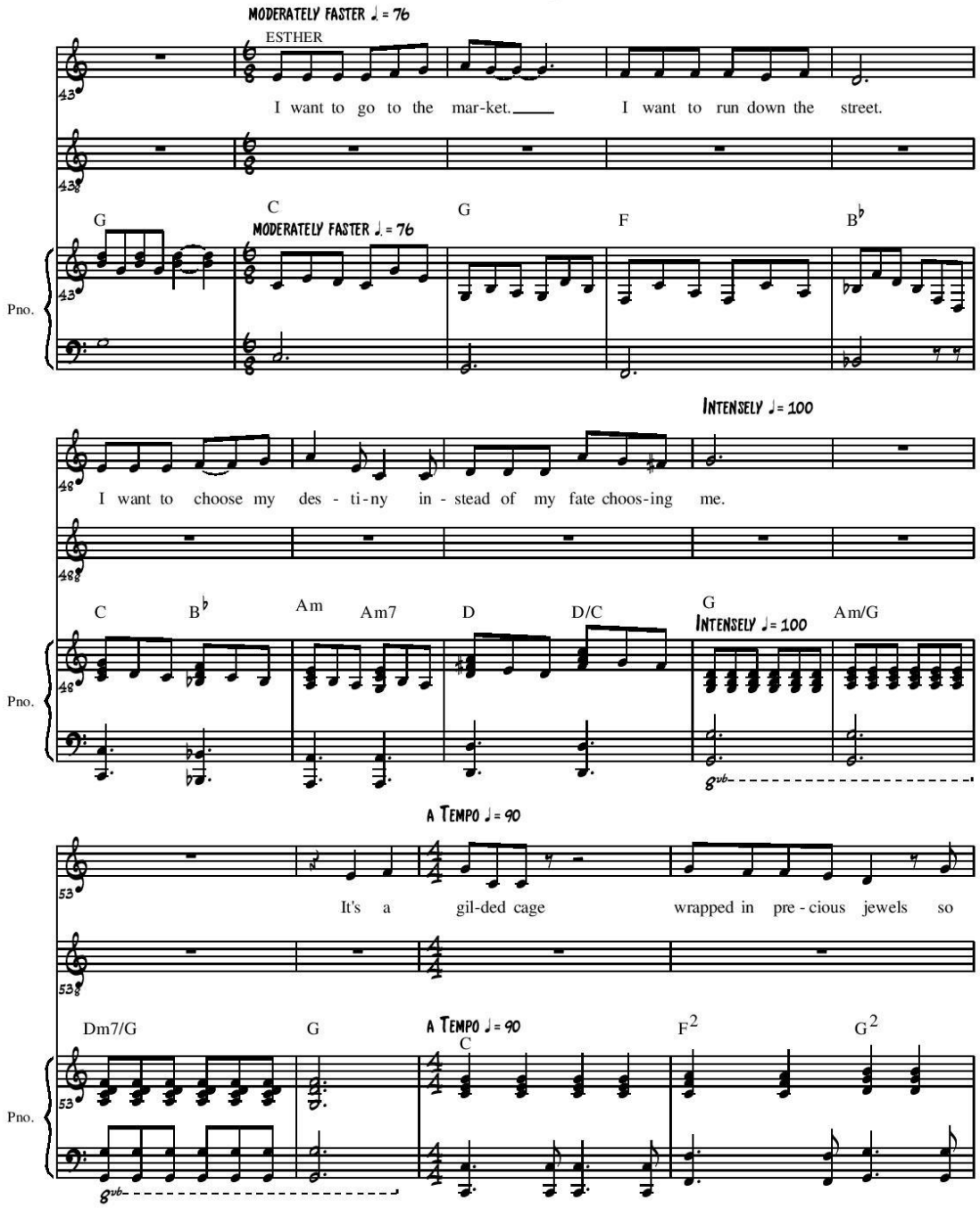
A Gilded Cage

Music and Lyrics by Glenna Bowman




HATHAK
and I don't know why. It's a gil-ded cage
F2/C D F/G G C
Pno.
wrapped in pre - cious jewels, so glo - rious to be - hold on the out - side that
F2/F G2/G A Dm
Pno.
Rit.
A Tempo
SURI
The sweet smell of
some-how leaves her long - ing for some-thing a world a - way.
G Ddim2/C C F
Rit.
A Tempo
Pno.


28
in - cense and frag - rant per-fume
ru - bies and gold
28
F/E
F/D
F/C
B♭
F2/F
Pno.
28
33
shim-mer all a-round.
It's beau - ti - ful.
Es-ther, don't you see?
33
Dm
C
F2/F
F2/E
F2/D
Pno.
33
38
We have all we ev-er need.
May-be this is meant to be.
38
F2/C
B♭
F2/C
D
F/G
Pno.
38


MODERATELY FASTER ♩= 76
ESTHER
I want to go to the mar-ket. I want to run down the street.
G C G F B♭
MODERATELY FASTER ♩= 76
Pno.
INTENSELY ♩= 100
I want to choose my des - ti-ny in - stead of my fate choos-ing me.
C B♭ Am Am7 D D/C G Am/G
INTENSELY ♩= 100
8vb
A TEMPO ♩= 90
It's a gil-ded cage wrapped in pre - cious jewels so
Dm7/G G A TEMPO ♩= 90 C F2 G2
Pno.
8vb

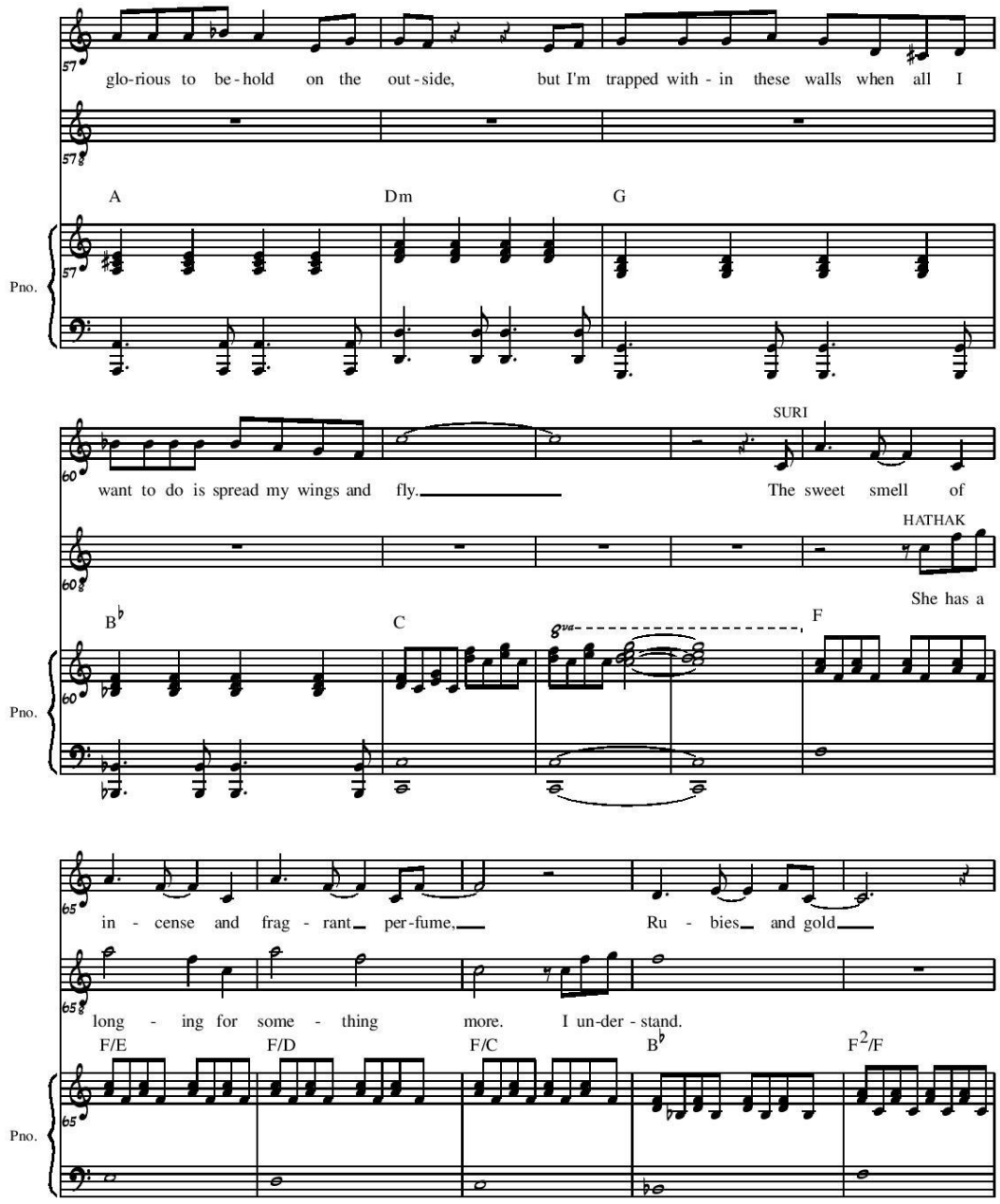


Figure 14: Score for "A Gilded Cage" by Glenna Bowman

Emphasis on this character trait bookends the script, since at the denouement after Haman is defeated, Mordecai is honored in his place, and Esther is restored as the favored consort of the King, Esther decides that she wishes finally to fulfill her desire to explore and, thus, embarks on a journey to visit all the nations encompassed in the Persian empire.

The cast and team of *Esther*, similar to what was experienced during the production of *Fiddler on the Roof* by the Austin Jewish Repertory a few years prior, became an occasion to reflect on the relevance of this story to contemporary events. The members of the cast came from a mix of ethnic backgrounds: Hispanic, Jewish, South Asian, and white, which was apropos for the moments designed to demonstrate the multi-cultural nature of the Persian Empire, such as the song "Come on out to the Party" in which representatives from different territories of the empire display their tribute for the King's festival. The explicit gestures of celebrating diversity both in casting and in the script is another subtle modernization, as multi-culturalism is not a value easy to reconcile with a strictly literal and fundamentalist exegesis of most of the Old Testament. These also help to frame the motivations of the villain Haman in a more contemporarily applicable manner, since he expressly frames his desire to destroy the Jewish population as a means of making Persia "truly one people united," and comments that the Jews are a malignant pestilence that must be cleansed from the Empire. This kind of rhetoric, while not distractingly out of place in a play set in antiquity, is certainly more reminiscent of post-19th century nationalism and the kind of racial pseudoscience invoked to justify eugenics and the holocaust. Paralleling how Esther's characterization in this version makes her akin to a modern ideal of womanhood without making her anachronistically feminist, Haman is made ever so slightly more similar to a modern-era anti-Semite.

Bennett Neiman, one of the ensemble members of the cast and a man of Jewish descent himself, joked during rehearsals that Haman and his sons should be chanting "Jews will not replace us" in the scene where they walk through the street and demand that Mordecai bow to them. This came within a year of the 2017 Unite the Right Rally and its counter protest. Just as the wave of wars and atrocities occurring around the world in 2014 made *Fiddler on the Roof* seem all the more pertinent, living in a country where the president himself openly pandered to the most explicitly racist elements of the population (and successfully was elected by doing so) and who subsequently failed to unequivocally condemn such ideology (leading to his infamous remarks that there were "very fine people" on both sides of the event), certainly affected the resonances of this story as well.

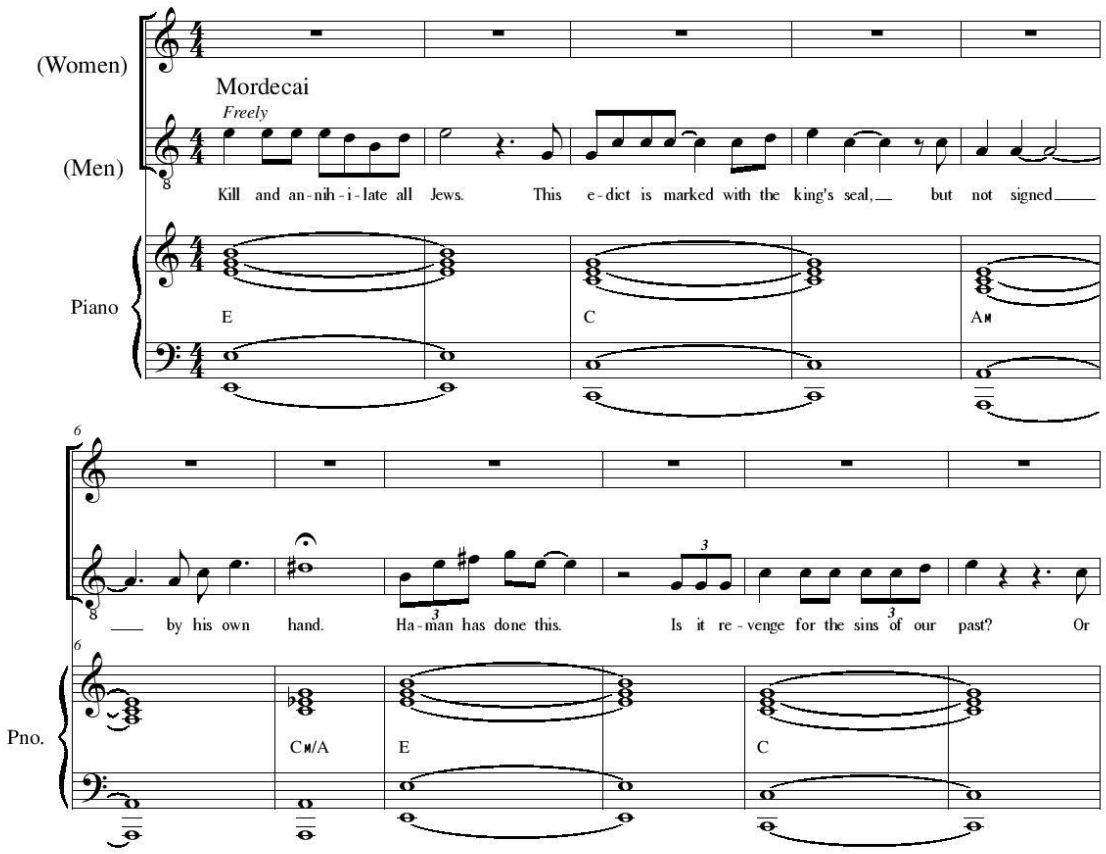
Haman's song "History" explains that his tribe, the Amalekites (in the script called the Agagites due to their lineage from King Agag), had themselves been victimized by the Israelites, and that he considers his plan to be justified revenge. Shortly afterwards in what is an emotionally climactic moment, Mordecai wonders if what is befalling his people is "revenge for the sins of our past," or if it was merely because he would not bow to Haman. These moments, occurring in quick succession, convey yet another contemporized interpretation of scripture, via acknowledging that many of the actions of the ancient Israelites towards their rival tribes and nations in the Levant as described in the Old Testament (irrespective of how strictly historical they may have been) were often atrocious themselves. Nevertheless, the subsequent song "Adonai TeShu'ati" (translated in the score as "lord my salvation" though the phrase might also be rendered "Lord my cry for help"), foregrounds the suffering of the Jewish people and the threat of genocide so as to dispense of any ambiguity as to where the audience sympathies are meant to lie. Though Mordecai questions what he or his people may have done to deserve such a

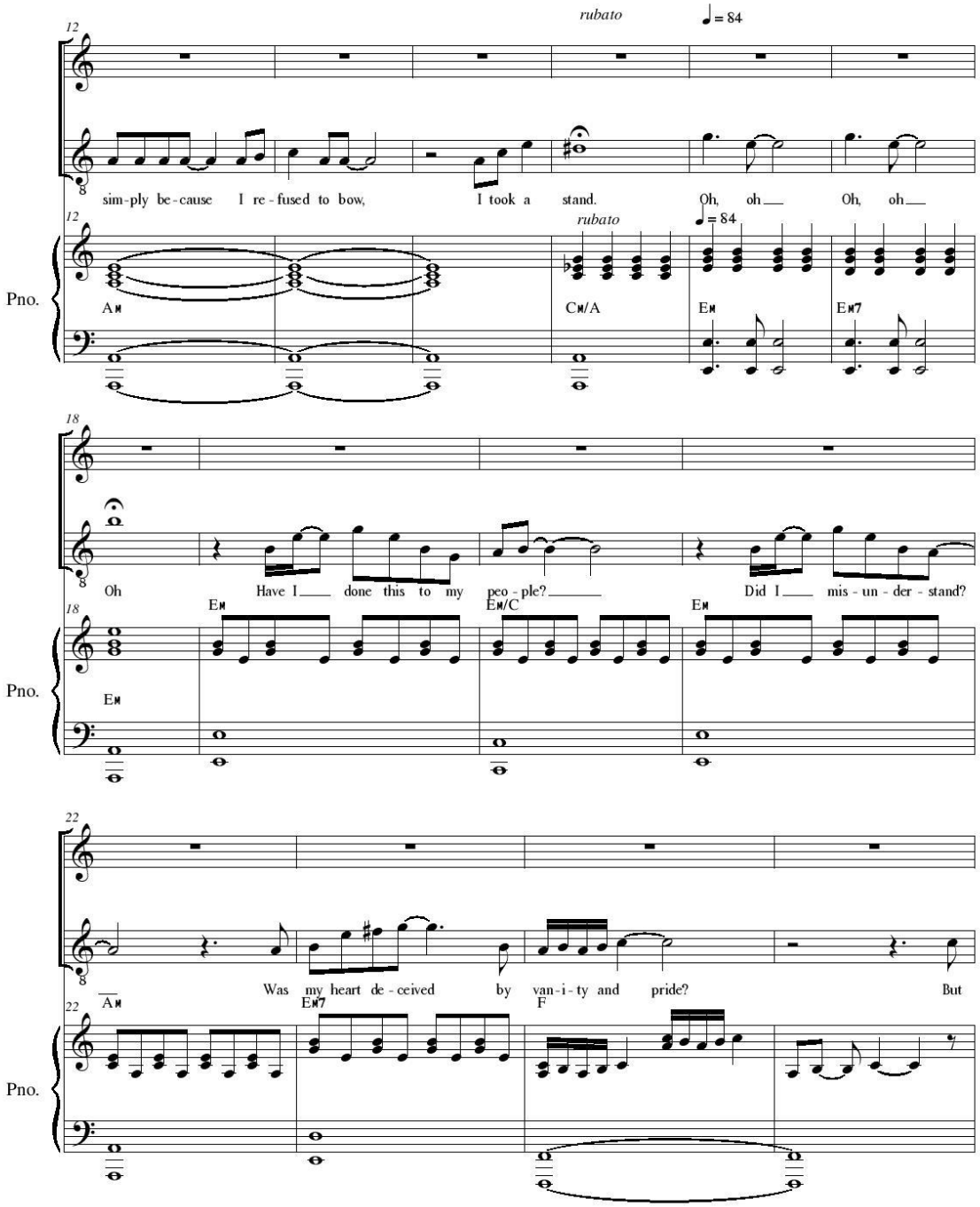
fate, and whether that is what God has in store, the song's musical and lyrical components make it clear that the Jewish denizens of Persia are helpless and innocent regardless of what their ancestors may have done. The contour of the melody suggests a minor key, but with a flattened seventh, which is also similar to the Rabbinical *Magein Avot* prayer mode. The dirge-like quality and choral singing are another parallel to *Fiddler On the Roof*, in particular, the concluding song from the latter's score, "Anatevka," wherein the people of the Shtettl mourn the loss of their home, also the product of an Edict enacted under an uncaring (and/or oblivious) monarch.

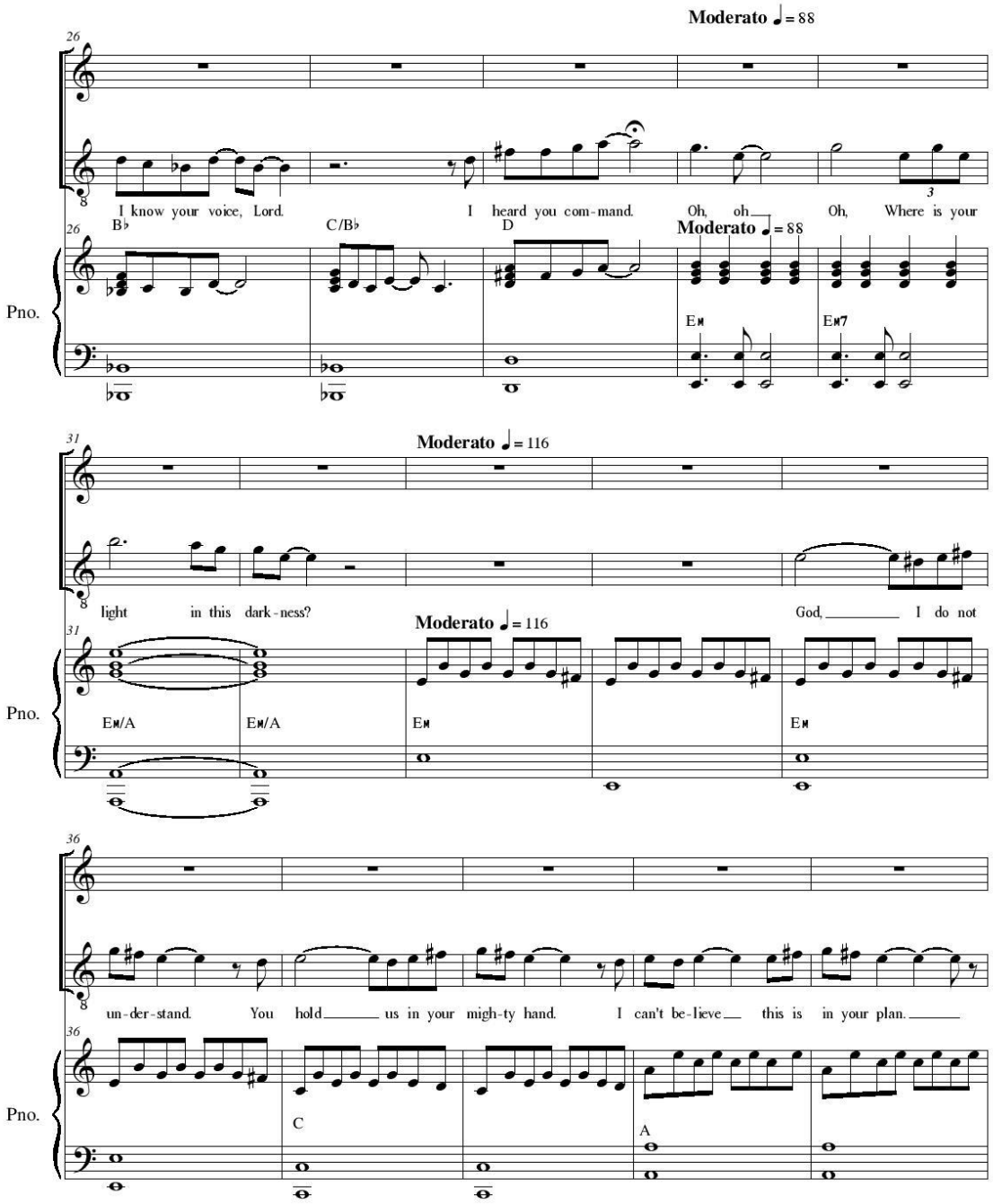
Adonai, Teshu'ati

(Oh, Lord, My Salvation)

Music and Lyrics by Glenna Bowman




rubato
♩= 84
12
sim-ply be-cause I re-fused to bow, I took a stand. Oh, oh Oh, oh
Pno.
Am
Cm/A
Em
Em7
18
Oh Have I done this to my peo-ple? Did I mis-un-der-stand?
Em
Em/C
Em
22
Was my heart de-ceived by van-i-ty and pride? But
Am
Em7
F


Moderato ♩= 88
26
I know your voice, Lord.
I heard you com-mand.
Oh, oh
Oh, Where is your
B♭
C/B♭
D
Moderato ♩= 88
Pno.
E♯m
E♯m7
Moderato ♩= 116
31
light in this dark-ness?
God, I do not
Moderato ♩= 116
E♯m/A
E♯m/A
E♯m
E♯m
36
un-der-stand. You hold us in your migh-ty hand. I can't be-lieve this is in your plan.
C
A

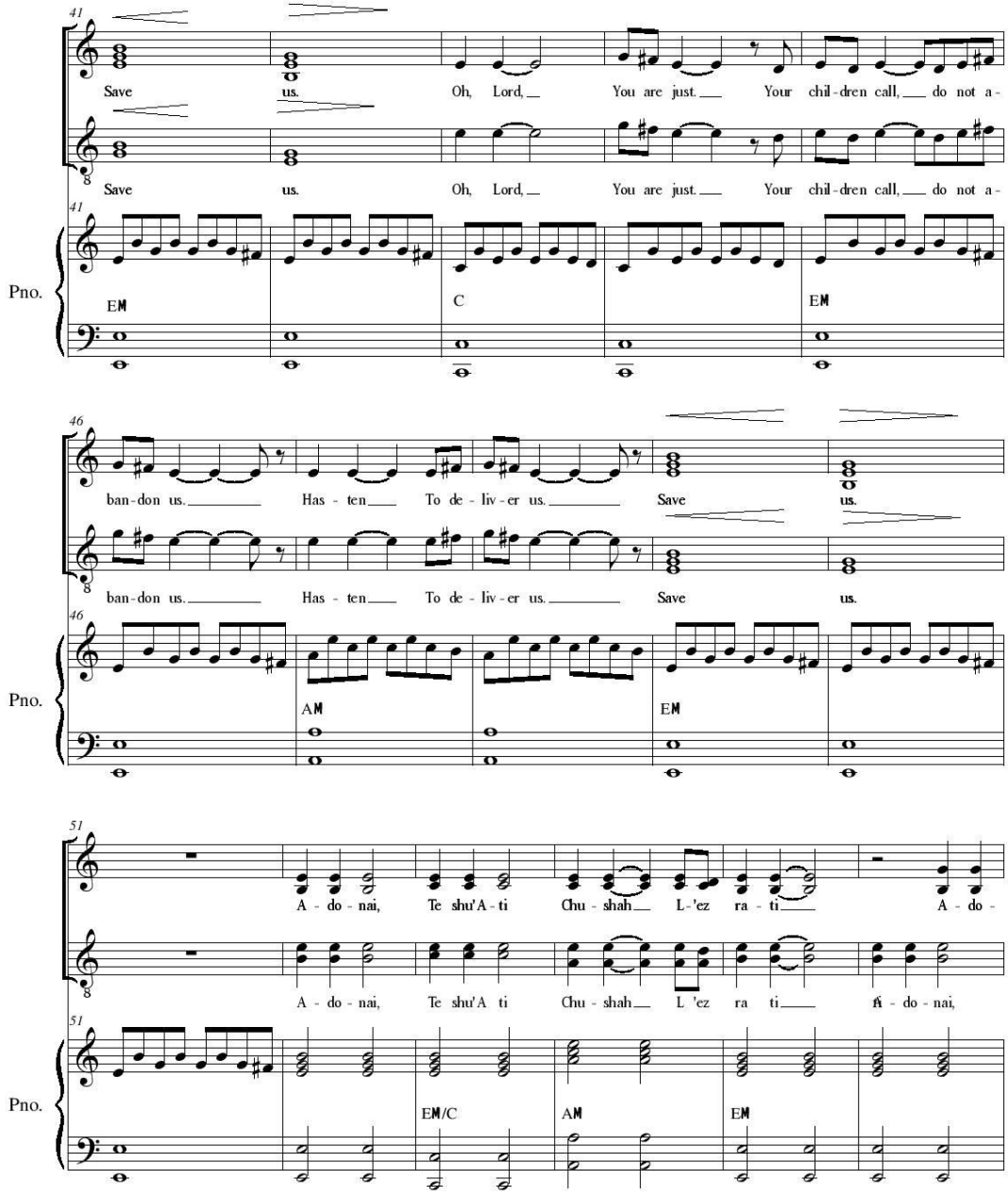


Figure 15: Score for “Adonai, Teshu’ati” by Glenna Bowman

These examples evoke how new and unknown works can exert an influence on people by framing their perceptions of the issues and themes of the story and their connection to earlier repertory. Whereas the examples of *Fiddler, Superstar* etc. all can be put in an intertexual web of relations to other works in the long history of musical theater, as well as the contemporary events or generational and demographic changes that influence the ways people have thought about these shows and the meanings they were imbued with, *Esther* cannot help but be processed, in some sense, in a more comparative way. Bowman herself commented that her inspirations were *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (in the general sense of a stylistically eclectic piece focused on a Biblical story), *Camelot* (in terms of striving towards a more refined, intimate style) while the examples I have extracted exhibit the broader, unconscious or semi-conscious influences from a myriad of other directions.

After *Esther's* staged reading at Zach in February 2018, several friends and acquaintances from other theaters and other shows commented about the qualities the show possessed. Several of them remarked on how *Esther*'s moments recall other "I want" songs even though the story as set out in the Biblical canon doesn't give her much agency (modernizing tweaks notwithstanding).[100] For many, in addition to being a favorite song for many, "Adonai Teshu'ati" had a great deal of resonance due to the current political climate and recent events. I myself commented on how I was in a reverse situation from how I had felt in participating in both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. Instead of having to represent Jewish identity, or reflecting on how an audience member could earnestly believe that an atheist might feel the spirit while pretending to be crucified, in *Esther* I was tasked with playing Haman, and

[100] Michael Meigs review on central Texas live theatre also commented that "Esther has little agency throughout": https://ctxlivetheatre.com/reviews/20180217-review-esther-a-new-musical-by-soundbeaco/.

had to give voice to a character who explicitly despises Jews, multi-culturalism, and yet believes he and his tribe are the ones who have been oppressed. In other words, I had to portray a representative of the kind of person I most virulently disagree with in the service of putting on a show.

The works of Texas Comedies and SoundBeacon represent opposing polarities in many respects. One explicitly labels itself Texan, the other does not. Texas Comedies strives towards accessibility and light-heartedness (at the least on the surface), while Soundbeacon's works strive openly to embrace more serious themes and a classic aesthetic and tone. John Cecil's music is written to appeal to small town Texas patrons who are fans of country, blues and roots rock while Glenna Bowman's is emblematic of a fan of Jerry Bock, Lerner and Loewe, and the golden age of musicals before 'pop' musicals came to be *en vogue*. Other locally produced original works may not as directly engage with Texan history or identity, or as directly exhibit how local writers endeavor to emulate the canon of the genre, but for many that produce them, they represent a common impulse to enrich the local scene and pull it towards being a "real theater town." Joey Banks, a performer and director who has worked with organizations like TexArts and Austin Playhouse, is currently working on writing and producing an original work with Andrew Canata, a performer and member of the board of Zilker Theatre Productions. Other companies like Fallout Theatre, the Vortex or the Hideout Theatre, though not primarily known for musicals, will occasionally produce more obscure works (which may or may not be locally written) or in the case of the Hideout, musicals that are completely improvised, as a way of reflecting the more idiosyncratic tastes of Austin and its satellites.

Banks, in particular, is a strong believer in the importance of cultivating the arts where you live rather than leaving for proverbial greener pastures, and thus avoiding the so-called brain

drain manifest by many seeking opportunities away from Austin. Joey, in conversations in and among the cast and crew of TexArts' recent production of *Annie* (which he directed) remarked that "We need more people to be willing to stay and create our own opportunities right here." Any further scholarship that aims to explore musical theater that does not continue to expand beyond the canon of Broadway and the works that had their debut in and near there will miss a crucial component in the artform's continued evolution and relevance. These examples demonstrate that producing a musical inevitably says something about the people and places that made them, whether one intends to do so or not. This manifests especially when groups endeavor to create something new, and not just in the content of the work, but in *how* they create the work; the adjustments, the balancing between conflicting impulses, the negotiating between myriad layers of meaning, current events, identities and the logistical, economic and personal challenges.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

So What Happens Now, Something for the Girls and Boys

The beauty of musicals, the whole idea of the modern-day musical starting with Oklahoma and moving on, the idea is that the character just can't get away with talking. It builds so much that they have to jump into song. So to find that moment to justify your character as a performer to start singing in the middle of a show, you have to find that moment. To that end, it is more prone to intimacy.

Lisa Scheps, personal interview September 2019

What other lines of work can you work that hard and intensely and learn all of that material and then it is done, you are not doing that anymore, you are doing something completely different you have to learn a completely new set of things, it's such a unique feel, our brains are set up to want something more.

-Susannah Crowell, personal interview September 2019

When I first proposed my research I had set out to determine whether musical theater in central Texas constituted its own subculture, to describe the space it occupied in people's identity and subjectivity and assess the meaning it had in people's lives. As is often the case, both the questions and the answers evolved over the course of my fieldwork and throughout the process of writing. Is musical theater as it is practiced Austin, San Antonio, Georgetown, Killeen or Fredericksburg etc. one single thing, one discrete subculture, or a series of overlapping circles of people and resources united at different moments by the common purpose of putting on a show? Can community musical theater be considered a single, easily defined category or a tangled net of ideas and a shared set of experiences?

In this chapter, as I am re-encapsulating the core ideas and arguments of the previous chapters I am also once again giving space for what my collaborators have had to say to be recorded and relayed. Many of my discussions with them have been about their perceptions of how musical theater, as an art form generally and as it is practiced locally, is changing, and speculating about how much further it will change, and what that indicates about the changes of the surroundings. Encompassed within this theme, and in other conversations about the present state of things, have been the issues of gender and sexuality, hi brow vs. low brow art, local economics and changing demographics, and how they think the local scene may grow or shrink.

As discussed in the second chapter, many organizations have experienced changes over the course of the years I have been involved with the local scene in central Texas. Some theaters have changed status from completely volunteer-based into professional (like the Public Theatre of San Antonio), some have gained and lost sources of funding or venues (such as the now venue-less City Theatre Austin company), some have opened new education programs and secondary performance spaces (like the Georgetown Palace Theatre), and some have gone defunct or relocated to other areas. These uneven transitions illustrate that if there can be said to be a unified subcultural consciousness connecting all the places in the region where musical theater is made, it is not devoid of disparities in power, status and economic resources, but rather exists in a system of varied engagement with discursive webs of aesthetic, cultural and economic value and positionality. As organizations come and go and as the money and talent flow in new directions, musical theater in central Texas will remain an especially relevant sphere to explore how collective artistic labor is thought of and valued.

As more research is conducted to expand our understanding of the neurological effects of music making socially, I believe it will become inevitable that ethnomusicologists will have

more opportunities to connect ethnographic research with the hard sciences, perhaps building on the connections between self-reported accounts of psychological effects of the practice of musical theater and the known neurochemical mechanisms of music's ability to influence mood and wellbeing that I have drawn in Chapter 3. If much of the thrust of musicological and ethnomusicological research is to show why music is important, why it matters, I believe musical theater's distinct, microcosmic communalism and lingering effects (for better or worse) on mental health will continue to be an important subject for future research.

For those who already study musical theater, I believe that regional ethnographic research like this dissertation will not only be useful but necessary. How people in areas like central Texas connect to and transform the Broadway canon or try to make their own contributions to the genre is needed to have a full understanding of it. As I have argued in Chapter 4, even continuing to study the great (or at least popular) auteurs and their works is enriched by examining how and what these works mean to people who enact them in different times and places outside of New York, Hollywood, London, and even the flagship regional theaters. Likewise, how local creators interact with their local cultural, political, demographic and spatial contexts as they produce works designed to express their aesthetic identity as I have explored in Chapter 5 greatly broadens the concept of what musical theater is or can be. Stories of sitting in a van going to small towns an hour or two's driving distance from Austin or San Antonio, or going through the challenges of writing, funding and staging an original piece when the safer investment lies in pandering to nostalgia, are stories that are vital and worth telling.

If one is going to speculate about the future of musical theater or the scholarship concerning it, as in many cases one should look to the upcoming generations. Several of my former castmates have worked as teachers in a variety of different settings, including at public

schools, teaching private lessons in studios, or working with after school programs. From their experiences teaching voice, dancing, and acting to young children many of them have anecdotally commented on the extent to which musical theater and theater in general retain particular associations of gender and sexuality that they had in decades past: the common observation alluded in previous chapters that more women than men are involved and the perception that musicals are in some manner "gay," the latter of which even manifests in "impressionistic" academic histories of the relationship between American and British musical theater and gay culture a la Clum's *Something For the Boys* (2014) .

Susannah Crowell, who has taught elementary school children at the local performing arts school and studio KidsActing, has had a great deal to say comparing her own relatively recent experiences in her adolescent years to what she's encountered teaching her students (Susannah is a recent graduate of UT-Austin in her early twenties). Describing her own experiences in middle school and high school she notes that it was common for men who participated in theater, especially when they performed musicals, to reflexively defend their involvement by reasserting their masculinity or offsetting the perceived strangeness of what they were doing with humor and self-deprecation:

> There were always more girls than boys, it was always harder to get a role as a girl, I was not allowed on interp. team in high school because it already had enough girls and they let a few boys in at the beginning of a semester and then they said "we have too many girls" and then they let a few guys in and a few of my best guy friends were let in. This career is a thousand times harder for girls, and boys can do whatever they want, boys can suck and still get Shrek in Shrek, there was a meme going around: girl takes dance classes rigorously since they were two, takes voice lessons every week for years, and she says "*gasp* I got a part in the ensemble." Meanwhile boy says "well I don't like this theater thing but the teacher cornered me after math class and said I had to be shrek in shrek." There weren't a lot of *out* girls or guys when I was doing theater as a kid and a lot of the guys I did do theater with were straight but there did always have to be the comment of "oh I'm going to do this dance but I'm so straight" (S. Crowell, personal interview, September 2, 2019).

In contrast, when describing the children she's taught, she sees more openness about non-heteronormative sexuality and non-binary gender identity and presentation, but also sees that generally boys of the upcoming generation, even hetero/cisgendered ones, seem more comfortable singing and dancing and otherwise participating in the performing arts:

> I have seen more kids coming out as gay or bi or trans and that being ok and being accepted. And a lot of them, a lot of the kids I'm seeing, are coming through the theater so I don't know how much that's changing in the population at large since I see more with [sic] kids in these classes. Of the boys that I see, there are boys who are comfortable being themselves and they are not afraid or defending or laughing off "ha ha isn't funny that I'm doing this, that I'm singing and I'm a boy." There's less of that, there's just boys singing or doing a dance move and that's what I do and there's less awkward laughter or having to justify in a joke or a comment what they are doing. And I see a lot of boys being able to be absolutely flamboyant and that's completely ok. And there are more and more girls who refuse to wear dresses, more girls are asking to play male roles or saying that "the female roles are making me uncomfortable" because a lot of the roles [in classic shows] are hyperfeminine.

In a statement that also ties into the greater visibility that non-white performers and perspectives have had in recent shows (especially works like *Ragtime* or *In the Heights,* the latter of which has been especially popular in high schools) Susannah added that "Working with children and seeing them see themselves in more characters is great." However she does not believe whatever changes she has observed mean that the seemingly old fashioned stereotypes have disappeared entirely or that there is not still progress to be made dismantling some of the biases and preconceptions about what it means to do musical theater. For her, and for many others, change is happening but is still an ongoing process. One particularly detailed account

from her teaching pursuits concerns staging a number from the musical adaptation of *Kinky Boots* (2012):

> One specific instance from recently, I taught a number from *Kinky Boots* and there was one boy in the class, all these kids are mid to late elementary school and some of the girls were giving the boy crap for even doing the dance, and the dance moves I was teaching, I thought about it and I thought I don't want to…..With every dance I create for a group of kids if there are any boys in the group I am hyper aware that they can get turned off from the dance completely if it feels too feminine, if something is coded in a way for them that they are feeling "I can't do this I'm a boy I want to keep being a boy I wanna show that I'm a boy. I can't do that dance move, it's the angles of the hands, the movements in general" it's standing strong or putting weight on one hip it's a lot of stuff that I know I'm not even aware of. But this was a dance from *Kinky Boots* that was as much drag queen pageantry as I could give little kids and a lot of the dance was from the original Broadway cast recording and they were giving the boy crap about doing some of the moves. This boy was doing the dance moves and his sister in particular on some of the moves, hand in the hip and pop the hip, so everyone is aware of this coding and a lot of the time dance in general can be coded as feminine.

Some of the coded gestures Susannah alludes to are among those enumerated in David Gere's *29 Effeminate Gestures*[101] and are manifest in recorded performances of the number "Raise you Up/Just Be" from.[102] While *Kinky Boots* is a relatively recent work that centers on drag performance and drag queen identity, Susannah alludes both in her narrative of her own past and her accounts of teaching young children recently that there remains a perception that the mere acts of singing or dancing, especially doing so in the context of musical theater as a man still often has to be justified or apologized for in some sense.

Kera Wright, who teaches in Georgetown (though not through one of the programs connected to the Palace Theatre), has a similar view of the state of gender norms and sexuality

[101] In his contribution to *Dancing Desires* (2001) by Jane C. Desmon ed., pp. 354-357. Some of these include off-set hip stances, dainty steps and downwardly bent or lip-wristed hand positions.
[102] The song in question is was performed live on television for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 2012, available now on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07cRs09fawI.

manifest in younger students' relationship to musical theater, and to the performing arts as a whole:

> [In my experiences] as a performer yeah there are plenty of straight guys and there are plenty of men to fill the roles. As a teacher though there are more girls who do it and fewer guys who are interested but I think that it's starting to shift and change a little bit, just as our culture is becoming more tolerant of artistic expression in young boys. For the year's musical I directed we had enough boys to fill two casts of the show (We did *High School Musical*). I'm kind of worried because I have a lot of guys who start off in the program but then find other interests, mostly sports.

Wright astutely points out that some of disparities that still persist between the presence of men and women during their prepubescent and pubescent years are attributable to the nature of much of the repertory (i.e. the roles available) and to some of the physiological realities of youth and adolescence that differ for boys and girls, for example:

> In my advanced class I only have five boys, that's why we are thinking of *Annie* and musicals that are lady heavy. And in middle school it's hard for guys to sing, their voices change overnight. I have heard boys voices crack in class when talking normally and it's so embarrassing for them that they shut down immediately and I can imagine the fear of performing like that in front of so many people, in middle school it's rough and rough going.

In my own experiences as a performer, I managed to avoid the disruptive effects of puberty by simply not doing choir or musicals during high school, but I know many male singers who experienced profound embarrassment due to their voice changing in their teenage years, something that has been somewhat underrecognized as a discouraging factor for many men to participate in any activity that involves singing.

Like Crowell, Wright also draws comparison to her own past with what she has experienced teaching groups of students belonging to the so-called generation Z age bracket or

younger (Wright is a few years older than Crowell but similarly could be placed into the millennial age demographic). She recalls that:

> When I was in high school there were maybe two openly gay students and then a few that were just coming out, but it was probably about 50/50 [among those who participated in theater] and that goes for the ladies as well. Of the five gentlemen in my advanced class now, they are all straight to my knowledge and based how they present at this point anyway. I have had several gay students and trans students and there are a few gay gentlemen in my other theater class, and maybe because it's an accepting place that's why they're joining.

These comments relate to what some of my male informants of a slightly older age group, like Rick Felkins, an openly gay man, and Jonathan Borden, a straight man who has confided to me that he has had multiple occasions where his involvement in musical theater has caused people to assume he was gay, have had to say about musical theater providing a safe space. Felkins, in particular, remarked that:

> One thing about musical theater especially for gay people, it was a place that was safe. In a world where safety was a big concern. When I was very young there were a lot of people who thought it was perfectly ok to kill you if they could find you alone and get away with it. And nobody would necessarily blame them. So, when you found little pockets or places where you could be yourself and be accepted and feel comfortable it's like walking into a world that you had always wished for. So, it was always a respite from the discrimination, the judgement of the world, and strangely enough it's the one place in the world where suspension of disbelief also allowed those people who were the biggest haters to appreciate you.

Wright and Crowell, while estimating that the tolerance for LGTBQ identities has increased even in their lifetimes (at least as evident in their direct experiences), still acknowledge that some of the attraction for many LGBTQ individuals still seems to be rooted in the desire to find a place of safety and acceptance. Felkins implicitly regards contemporary mainstream society as at least somewhat safer as a whole than it was in his own youth, although none of them deny the continued threat that hate crimes and anti-LGBTQ violence still pose.

Other contributors have weighed in on the extent to which musical theater nationally or in the local scene is enjoying growth or resurgence, and whether or not this may have reciprocal influences on changing attitudes about different modes of performance. With regard to the increased freedom to participate among hetero-cisgendered men uninhibited, many of my LGTBQ friends at times have expressed mixed feelings about this trajectory. Adam Roberts, in conversations about whether or not musical theater was still perceived as "gay" or at least as a realm where gay male culture and identity had a disproportionate influence, commented that he thought musical theater was simply "going back to what it was a hundred years ago," i.e., before writers, composers, and performers who were gay or Jewish or both began to become more prominent on Broadway in the 1920s.[103] Others, like Kirk Kelso, express happiness that society seems more accepting and open and that the art form is starting once again to be more popular among a broader array of fans, while also acknowledging the potential sense of loss that may come from no longer feeling as strong a sense of ownership:

> I can see how a group of people would not want to lose something that they see themselves as the people who honed it and made it great and "we're the ones who did all this, and now you're coming in and taking it all away from this" but are we all getting a piece of the pie. Is it that the more people that can enjoy it, does that make it bigger and better or are they taking something away from you that you cannot get back? (K. Kelso, personal interview, June 6, 2019).

Alongside narratives of musical theater growing or reclaiming its prominence in the mainstream of popular music-making, there have been developments that seem to indicate that there is still resistance to acknowledging the cultural and artistic merits of musical theater. Crowell, once

[103] In Mast's *Can't Help Singin'* (pp. 30-38) he describes how earlier composers like George Cohan, a highly patriotic, straight Irish-American composer quickly became eclipsed in then contemporary importance and subsequently in the history books by creators who were gay, Jewish or both.

again as a recent graduate of UT as a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and Dance, describes the impression she has often felt of a dismissive attitude towards being involved with musicals:

> I think the biggest thing is that people see it as being so commercially successful [relative to other kinds of live theater] that it's just completely commercial: you're not working hard you're pleasing an audience, it does not have depth it doesn't require "acting." I hear that a lot, it's not technically difficult dancing, not technically difficult singing or any real acting. That's mostly what I hear, that it's a copout of all three. That it's there to please an audience and it isn't deep….Very few people have come up to my face and just said "musical theater is easy and dumb" but I've been one of those people who presents themselves as "Hi I'm Susannah and I stand for musical theater" my whole life and I've been that kid that really, really wanted to do it, so no one has said that to my face but I have heard second-hand about professors telling other theater majors, "No! you need to focus on your real acting, you can really go in-depth with a character when you're not doing a silly, cheesy musical theater script."

Like most ethnomusicologists and other scholars of popular music, my research has not been concerned primarily with validating the depth or the aesthetic worth of musical theater, even though I have discussed its ambiguous status between realms of high art and commercial music making, and I believe my work, especially in chapter 4, helps to demonstrate that the works in its repertory/canon express and contain a great deal of meaning, no matter what compositional, dramaturgical or technical qualities they may have, and regardless of how "deep" or "commercial" they are purported to be. Furthermore, there are many who would argue that a dismissive view of musicals as "silly" is short-sighted from a purely practical, career-building perspective. Lisa Scheps, for example, commenting on perceptions that most musicals are shallow or risible, commented that:

> When you look at the current realm of musical theater it's very heady, it's not fluff or very rarely is it fluff. And I get kinda dismissive of total fluff (I will say right now if I never see *Silence: The Musical*[104] (2005) again I will be very happy but that's more of a

[104] Which was performed by Doctuh Mistuh Productions in Austin in 2014 and in 2016. In my field experiences, Joe Penrod who was a castmate in *Sweeney Todd* and *Camelot* referred to being offered the role of Hannibal Lektor and turning it down in particular due to the song "If I could smell your cunt."

> statement about that piece than about the genre). But I will say [some people and institutions] turning their nose at musicals is stupid from a professional standpoint and I spend a lot of time talking to younger people going into a theater career. If you're going to go to New York to try to make it as a performer you goddamn better be a triple threat. I moved to New York as a performer, I was a single threat and my options were very limited as to what I could do. From a professional standpoint that's stupid, it's short sighted to do that. I think it was a money Thing at UT [that caused them to discontinue their annual musical and musical theatre major track in 2017]. Musicals are very expensive to produce. That's important work for an industry that thrives with that. The current spate of work is literally very heady and erudite in many ways. One of the people who came to see *Fun Home* complained that it wasn't fun!

If nothing else, I hope that this dissertation has contributed to the expansion of our understanding of musical theater beyond the frameworks of spectacle, escapism or disposable entertainment; that it helps buttress the argument that while musicals can be "fun" or "fantasy" that they are much more than those things as well. As with any form of music making, musical theater is an important, meaningful realm of culture, and it is an especially salient example of music making as a communal event. It forces its creators to grapple with the conflicted ways we as Americans often think about the worth of artistic labor and the role of art in bringing people together, it has a pronounced influence on its participants' social lives and mental health, and it is one path through which our histories, our cultural myths, and our relationships with our surroundings are processed. For myself, and all of my collaborators, I hope that this representation of their lives helps others to come an understanding of the worth of what they do, and that for all of us the shows will go on.

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